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cineACTION



**NEW MEDIA
CANADIAN FILMS
MICHAEL HANEKE
TORONTO
FILM FESTIVAL**

CDN / US



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BACK COVER: *Les Ordres*

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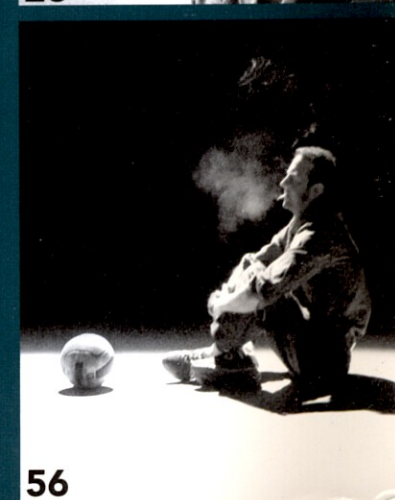
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NEW MEDIA CANADIAN FILMS TORONTO FILM FESTIVAL

This issue brings together a wide range of discussions and criticism. Catherine Russell and Eli Horwatt explore new media work in IPOD films and machinima. Peter Harcourt presents a neglected classic of Quebec cinema. Other articles consider urbanity in Canadian cinema, hot Quebec film and TV stars, new Maritimes documentaries and the cultural significance of Guy Maddin. Aysegul Koc interviews the great director and cinematographer Michel Brault. Robin Wood considers several of the provocative films of Michael Haneke.

Each year, we feature reviews of new films premiering at the Toronto International Film Festival. In this issue, members of the editorial collective offer insights on highlights of the 2007 edition.

—Scott Forsyth, Editor

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We have just launched our new website – **cineaction.ca** designed by Mike Cartmell. The website offers information on subscriptions and back issues, selected articles for reading and easier access for contacting us or submitting contributions.

APOLOGY

In the last issue, "The Risk of Ambiguity: Reconsidering Zavattini's Film Ethics" by Nicholas Balais was printed without footnotes. The complete article is available on our website.

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Mini-Cinema

A Digital Diary for iPod

CATHERINE RUSSELL

Midi Onodera's "movie-a-day" project is a series of 365 short videos, each less than a minute long and many less than 40 seconds. Like a diary, the entries are intimate and they feature a first-person-singular enunciation along with personal details about the author's life: her travels and her memories, her pets and her homes, her dreams and her fears, her experiences and her desires. But this diarist is not to be trusted. The details don't add up and the persona is incomplete, inconsistent and often incoherent, as if the diary were compiled from the fragments of lives lived in a highly mediated world of experience. It is a world of aphorisms and clichés, bad jokes and tourist brochures within which a poetic voice struggles for survival.

Shot primarily on a "VcamNow" digital camera marketed for children, Onodera's images are low definition, and feature close-ups of things and spaces such as landscapes, low and high angles of streets and interiors, and a wide range of digital abstractions. The imagery is usually framed within the frame of the screen by black or coloured borders, and the image is frequently split, multiplied and layered into even smaller pieces of movement and colour. She uses all kinds of special effects to make the imagery dynamic, and with the sheer volume of 365 little movies, the diversity is impressive. Each video has an electronic soundtrack, often using altered ambient sound, and each one has titles: an opening title followed by intermittent fragments of text superimposed on the images themselves. Insofar as the component parts work together to create dialogic effects, the 365 instalments are perhaps better understood as multimedia collages rather than "movies" or "films" or even

"videos" (even if I will continue to refer to them as such). As David James has argued, "every film is an allegory of a cinema," insofar as every film "internalizes the conditions of its production."¹ In the case of Onodera's "movie-a-day" project, the social relations at issue are those of digital cinema and the mode of production is the miniaturized delivery system of the iPod.

Onodera's project is at once excessive in its sheer quantity and banal in its focus on the mundane and everyday. There are, in fact, more than 365 videos, as the package I received had ten "bonus" videos of more of the same. And yet they are not the same at all. Each little, numbered, video is like a surprise package or candy to unwrap, taste and dissolve in your mouth—or your hand as the case may be. One can screen them from a DVD onto a TV or computer screen, or one can find them online at www.midionodera.com, but I found they worked best on the iPod where they mimic the toy-like miniaturization of cinema that the new technology makes possible. As experimental films, they continue the project of exploring the aesthetic and cultural possibilities of the technologies of audio-visual representation, in keeping with the history of the avant-garde mapped out by David James. In this on-going reinvention of cinema, they constitute a reconfiguration of the everyday.

Many of the 365 videos are addressed to "you," an interlocutor who might be a lover or might be a number of lovers, or who might be the viewer, or might be simply the fiction of someone who cares. For example, *The Ride Down*



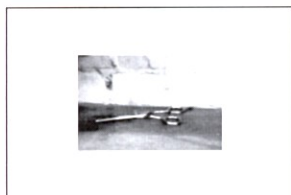
features the light glimpsed through the cage of a warehouse elevator going down. The ride is interspersed with intertitles saying: "I thought you'd be home/ I wanted to see you/ I had something important to say/ just to you/ but you weren't there." The ride ends with a bump on the ground and the camera moves toward the door. The little camera is an appendage of the filmmaker's body, a woman who is herself barely glimpsed and who never films the faces of her friends. Only the faces of occasional anonymous passers-by are shot and even then, only at a distance. These are strangely unpopulated films. The only characters are animals: pets who are named, farm animals who are crudely anthropomorphised (in videos called *Anthropomorphism 00.1* and *02.7* etc.), and dogs on leashes at one of Onodera's favourite floor-level camera angles.

Other videos feature montage compositions of urban grid-like buildings in the urban landscape; many feature trains and streetcars, many are about driving, parking and riding a scooter. The filmmaker's gaze frequently emulates the panoramic views and phantom rides of early cinema when it is appended to technologies of transportation, so that even in the countryside it is a very urbanized view of the world. The mobile gaze is one of many ways in which the "I" of the project is unsettling. "I" am at different times a car, a famous artist, someone who works in an office or puts up signs in airports, a daughter, a "home-town boy"—everyone except an experimental filmmaker. Onodera includes a number of images of homes in the country, with various stories attached to them—where



(she says) she used to live before she won the lottery, where her grandfather used to live, where she used to live with no neighbours nearby, or the house she can't afford. Is this an insight into the filmmaker's longing for a house as a token of home? The many lies serve to hide the truth.

The persona within the diaries is very occasionally recognizable as Onodera, who we know from her previous films such as *The Displaced View* (1988) and *Ten Cents a Dance (Parallax)* (1985) in which she appears. In the course of the 365 videos she gets her hair cut and she



goes on vacation; she complains about going to work and she has memories of Japan. And yet the videos conceal far more than they reveal; they point to all the details of her life that the filmmaker keeps to herself. Her experiences are all generic; they all belong to everyone: headaches, allergies, waiting in airports, looking for items on store shelves. She goes to Ireland, Venice, Los Vegas,

New York and Ontario cottage country, but her images are too small to reveal these places beyond recording the fact that she was there. Her post-production manipulations render these trips as memories of having been there, recalled and re-configured as tokens of experience.

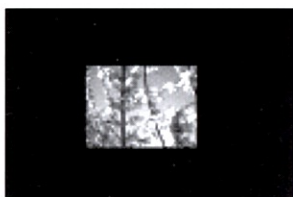
Perhaps the most difficult element of these little videos is the text that is stamped onto the imagery in a variety of changing fonts. For example, *Perchance to Dream* is a long shot of a plastic bag caught in a winter tree branch accompanied by an echoing soundtrack of altered ambient sound. Thirty seconds into the 43-second film, titles appear under the evocative image saying "Sometimes your dreams/ just hit a snag." The words are like heavy objects weighing down the poetry of the film, dragging it back into the banality which it otherwise briefly transcended. The series is full of such clichéd language which is at once a distraction and an inscription of the media universe in which these films are implanted. Some of the videos use statistics and didactic warnings about the environment and HIV/AIDS; others invoke issues such as bird flu, airplane safety and bits of trivia about current events and history: yellow journalism, domestic abuse, Mohawk construction workers in New York, etc. The project embraces the world of information, trivia and received wisdom that remains more sincere than ironic, despite Onodera's colourful reworking of it.

The films' language frequently structures them as aphorisms or jokes. *True Believer*, in which train sounds accompany an unidentifiable moving light (maybe a flashlight?) in the darkness contains the following statement: "I don't believe/in ghosts/I don't believe in coincidence/I believe/ In revenge/I believe in good floor wax." Although the videos occasionally use fragments of recorded music and old photographs, these archival sources are the exception rather than the rule. The songs, mainly scratchy old tunes from the archive, such as "The Old Mill Stream" or "Old MacDonald," are counterpointed with contemporary images—feet in a shower, or documentary footage of a construction site for example. The aesthetics are clearly linked to surrealism, abstraction and collage, but at the same time they participate in a more contemporary discourse of design and graphic arts.

The 365 videos rigorously interrogate the nature of the "image" as an object. The techniques Onodera uses include a play with framing in which the image size and shape is consistently varied, a dynamic use of saturated colours, and special effects that alter space and time. An



extensive palette of designer colours are used to frame the videos, making interesting contrasts with the many striking images of nature. The rich colours contribute to the object-like nature of the image. "Hankie" is a close-up shot of yellow goldenrod against a deep blue sky. The image shakes with the force of several sneezes, restabilising with the phrase "allergy season," and ends with a shaky cough.

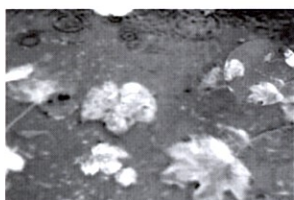


The poetry might be tacky, but the imagery is beautiful. A recurring technique of mirroring the split-screen image into a Rorschach twin creates a simple but remarkable effect with landscape, or with traffic. By

flipping the image, a formality is imposed on documentary reality and the "movie" starts to speak to itself within the technology of representation. Some of the videos are parodies of instructional videos, going through the steps of pie-making, oyster-shucking or butchering a chicken. In these and in other instalments featuring driving or time-lapse photography, time is compressed into the tight frame of the speedy little films which are over before you can blink. If you are watching the films on a bus, train or plane, your gaze may wander away and you miss an entire instalment.

Rabbit Shit Haiku

The brevity and overall smallness of Onodera's 365 movies belie their complexity. They participate in a world of disposable culture, and yet their effervescence and formalism recalls haiku. Each one has at least three components: a title, an image or set of images, music or sound, and usually titles on, between, or over the images. The different elements tend to be discontinuous, such that the overall effect of each small film is made up of the collision of textual fragments. They evoke the poetic form of the haiku in their fragmentary simplicity and their extensive use of nature imagery, even if many of the films contain messages of a didactic nature that are antithetical to the



Japanese poetic form. The very first of the 365 is most explicitly haiku-like, with its title *The End of Summer*, evocations of death in the text, a voice intoning Japanese words, and a dissolving display of watery shots

of autumn leaves in the rain.

In Jonas Mekas's diary film *Lost Lost Lost* (1975) he includes 56 "Rabbit Shit Haikus"—experiments with nature, film technology and language which anticipate Onodera's project by more than 30 years. I'm not sure if Mekas was the first filmmaker to attempt to write haiku with film, but his version in the midst of a monumental film project might serve as a valuable reference point. Mekas's approach to diaristic filmmaking has a sincerity of course that stands in striking contrast to Onodera's

frivolous use of the first-person pronoun "I". His project mobilizes a subjectivity deeply inscribed in larger discourses of geopolitics, the cultural spheres of the avant-garde and Romanticism, and the gendered space of the family—all of which are radically excluded from Onodera's oddly impersonal story.

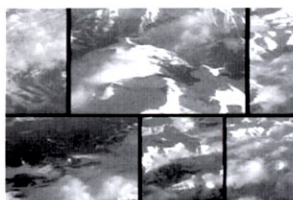
The differences between the two projects may outweigh the similarities, and yet the diary modality is in some key respects consistent. Jonas Mekas was the original "displaced person" of experimental cinema,² and Onodera has also identified herself, in her previous work, in terms of difference,³ and both filmmakers experiment with the construction of identity in media. The filmic diary is in both projects a palimpsest of temporalities in which the time of filming is overlaid by the time of "writing"—of post-production processes of editing and adding sound and text. The experience of filming using handheld technologies (Mekas used a Bolex) is registered in both projects as a kind of presence in the world of things and people. The body and the eye were there in that world, and the images recorded become a kind of archive of experience. In the second stage, that experience is revised as a memory bank is searched, restored and catalogued, "collected" into a narrative or history. The two filmmakers, working in two very different eras of what Benjamin called "mechanical reproduction" exploit the disjunctive gap between the two temporalities for very different effects.

Mekas's film-haikus are fragments of a larger narrative of his autobiography. They are numbered and of variable length of one second to about 30 seconds, and they contain short scenes set in nature. His narration is rhythmic and repetitive, as he intones "The trees, the trees, the trees," or "The childhood, the childhood, the childhood," although there are only adults in the images, frolicking in the snow, wading in the river, or walking in the woods. The imagery evokes the freedom and leisure of being in the countryside among friends, without a care in the world, enjoying "the wind, the wind, the wind," or "the clouds, the clouds, the clouds." And yet, the overwhelming sense of loss assigns the scenes to a time long ago, as if they were being turned into memories or memorials. Everyday life is transformed by cinema into a mediated vision where existential despair is briefly transformed into poetic interludes. The significance of the rabbit shit haikus in *Lost Lost Lost* is indicated by a story that Mekas relates (twice) in voice over, about "the man who couldn't live anymore without the knowledge of what's at the end of the road." When he reached it, "he found a pile, a small pile of rabbit shit at the end of the road, and back home he went and when people used to ask him, 'Hey, where does the road lead to?', he would answer, 'Nowhere. The road leads nowhere and there is nothing at the end of the road but a pile of rabbit shit.' Not even the rabbit was there. The road leads nowhere."

In 2007 Jonas Mekas created his own series of 365 films, also made for internet and iPod, although where

Onodera's instalments are terribly brief, each of Mekas's run from five to ten minutes.⁴ The films are dated to chronicle the days of the year, and they are in much the same style as *Lost Lost Lost* and the other segments of the *Diary Notes and Sketches* project of the 60s and 70s, although he himself is far more present now in front of the camera. Densely populated with friends, colleagues and celebrity musicians and filmmakers, this is the everyday life of the Artistic Director of Anthology Film Archives, a man at the center of a cultural whirlwind, who has nevertheless retained his poetic D.I.Y. sensibility. In lieu of special digital effects, Mekas relies on low-tech graphics, low-level lighting and his familiar voice-over narration. He may have replaced his Bolex with a video camera, but his methodology has hardly changed at all. A certain obsession pervades this work, a desire to grasp every living moment before it slips away unnoticed and unremarked, to endow the banality of everyday life with the poetry of memorialization.⁵ The story about the rabbit shit is predictably recited in Mekas's rhythmic intonations in the January 30, 2007 episode.

For Mekas, the difference between the present and the past is always tinged with nostalgia as he inscribes longing into every image of his life. Onodera challenges that sense of nostalgia with a more pervasive sense of the ephemeral. The final video called *the end?* features a set of aerial shots of mountainous landscapes shot from a plane,



tinted vibrant shades of blue, green, purple, orange and red, in a changing rectangular collage of frames. With a soundtrack of electronic rumblings, the titles announce the imminent crumbling of the planet home that we

take for granted. Again, the didacticism of the text lends banality to the imagery, and the apocalyptic "message" is packaged into a platitude of doom. Only the colours speak out from the digital matrix, indicating a way out of the impasse of global despair. The absurdity of seeing the planet dissolve in the palm of your hand as you cradle your toy is much more powerful than the "message" of environmental collapse. If we can hold the whole world in our hands with an iPod, all sentiments are going to be diminished. In this sense Onodera might have discovered the true (digital) form of the rabbit shit haiku for the early 21st century.

The haiku form as it originated with Basho and the Zen poets was an attempt to evoke a certain experience through language: the experience of insight into the oneness of nature and the insignificance of self. As a fragmentary form, it appeared strangely "modern" to modernists such as Jonas Mekas. Three lines, three images or thoughts, snap together into a kind of recognition of the fleetingness of time, the fullness of the moment and the emptiness of past and present. Both Mekas and Onodera serialize their film-haikus in numbered series—a format

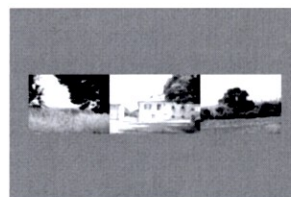
that inscribes an industrialized technology onto the nature imagery. If Mekas longs for the ideal of the haiku form from which he has been permanently "displaced," Midi Onodera's project poses the question of poetry in the digital age, or whether iPod haiku is even possible. The iPod adds more information to an already crowded media environment, constituting a distraction from the big picture and more or less inverting or negating the oneness of the Universe by breaking it up into ever smaller pieces infused with technology.



The small videos that comprise Onodera's 365 movies have a haiku format in their brevity and their tendency toward the isolation of detail. A single visual element dominates each instalment, and is counter-pointed with sound and text. The poetic effect is a technologically mediated haiku. While the style and the mode of address refer to commercial media, especially advertising, the colours and the play with movement, line, density and collage evoke the avant-garde. As a diary, the project expresses the conflicting impulses of contemporary media toward the creative possibilities of the digital for art-making, on the one hand, and its tendency toward the ephemeral and disposable on the other. 365 films is "too many" movies. What use do they have? What role will they play? Their poetic effect is invested to some extent, in the hardware on which they are viewed, and the ways they interrogate the purposelessness of media. If this seems like a rather bleak conclusion, it is in keeping with the rather bleak outlook of the videos themselves, which are preoccupied with global pandemics and disasters, alongside the drudgery of work and the monotony of routine. However, approached from a slightly different angle, Onodera's 365 videos might be more redemptive.

Miniature Cinema

Writing about QuickTime movies in 1999 (almost ten years ago) Vivian Sobchack compared them to Joseph Cornell's boxes that he assembled in the 1930s and 40s. Like Cornell's collections of photos and small artefacts displayed in materialist collages, QT movies operate as "memory boxes." Sobchack argues that both "emerge explicitly from their relation to a larger totality of material and memorial possibilities: they and their found objects exist... as fragments of a personal experience."⁶ In accessing the database of the computer memory, the QT movie always also refers to everything missing, to the depth and scope of what lies outside the tiny frame. She says, "watching a QT memory box, I always feel the presence of an elusive and vast absence, a sea of memories shifting below the surface and in the interstices of what I actu-



ally see. In other words, I am always aware of the database as *effluvial*.”⁷

Many of Sobchack’s remarks about QT movies apply to Onodera’s 365 movies as well. Indeed, especially given the personal and artisanal manner of their construction, they evoke Cornell’s collages, and in a sense they play out Sobchack’s compelling analogy between Cornell and QT movies in a surprisingly literal way. With the prominence Onodera gives to framing, the many ways in which frames appear within frames, the nested framing within the rectangle of the screen, the short videos evoke the displays of Cornell’s boxes. Onodera may not refer to the archive of popular culture and memorabilia as extensively as he does; and yet, her own experience as a body in space—in the city—becomes referenced as a “vast absence” of which we can glimpse only moments and traces. Certainly the remnants of songs, photos, clips and TV images that litter the series tend to reference and package the sensuality of past experience and cultural memory, but unlike Cornell, they are integrated into the pseudo-narrative of the film diary.

The impulse to record something “every day” becomes a ritual that structures the series. Without any guarantee at all that the films were made on the consecutive days of an entire year, the 365-plus films nevertheless constitute an accumulation of memories which have been assigned dates. The impulse toward totality inevitably also points to all that which is forgotten, unrecorded and unrevealed—some of which may be lingering in a database or hard drive somewhere outside the frame. Sobchack’s argument about QT movies is based in part on Gaston Bachelard’s



notion of space, and the aesthetics of containment, but also on Susan Stewart’s theory of the miniature. Stewart’s discussion of the aesthetics of size concerns the way that signification is altered through the processes of

magnification and exaggeration that characterize gigantism and miniaturization. As the relation of viewer to image or text is altered, so too is the production of meaning.

Stewart describes the miniature books of the 15th century as tiny accessories that were worn like jewels. They contained within them such information as calendars and almanacs, or bibles carefully and meticulously transcribed. For Stewart, the miniature “appears as a metaphor for all books and bodies.”⁸ It amplifies interiority and exteriority and the division between them, and thus exaggerates “the divergent relations between the abstract and the material nature of the sign.” Consider her remarks on the miniature book in relation to Onodera’s gem-like haikus: “the book/jewel, carried by the body, multiplies significance by virtue of the tension it creates between inside and outside, container and contained, surface and depth.”⁹ She further suggests that the miniature is the closest thing we have to a three-dimensional language, for

it continually points outside itself, creating a shell-like or closed exteriority.”¹⁰ If the diary project is about making one’s experience somehow “significant,” Onodera challenges and complicates the authenticity of experience. The image-object crystallizes perception and experience as an effect of technology, so that the “inside” is neither the identity of the filmmaker nor the residue of experience, but an allegory of these things.



The reader of miniaturization, or the viewer of an iPod movie, is rendered larger, and in a sense disengaged from the text. The body is materialized in relation to the text-object and is necessarily outside and beyond it. Haidee Wasson has examined the small screens of QuickTime in light of Stewart’s notion of miniaturization to suggest that it is a cinema of “suggestion”—rather than attraction. Streamed web films, which Onodera’s 365 films are also designed for, are by nature fragmented and unstable, linked to the networks of technologies that bring them to the variable interfaces of computer screens.¹¹ iPod cinema is likewise dependent on a variable technological apparatus of delivery, and perhaps even more than QT movies, the hand-held movie is materialized in its technological inscription. Onodera’s experimental aesthetics tend to foreground the technological abstraction of the pixilated image, exploring the full range of optics that the low-density image allows.

Stewart also notes that the miniature lends itself to tableau rather than to narrative. She remarks that it tends “toward expository closure. Whereas speech unfolds in time, the miniature unfolds in space.” This brings us close to the contradictions informing Onodera’s project in which everyday life is cut off from everyday life, packaged and labelled as precisely “epigrams and proverbs”—which Stewart notes are forms “whose function is to put an end to speech and the idiosyncrasies of immediate context.”¹² The miniature creates an “other” time, outside historical time, a time of reverie and fantasy, a time that Sobchack has linked to the unconscious of the database of computer memory. In Onodera’s iPod cinema, the nostalgia of a diary project such as Mekas’s is reconfigured as a spatial relationship between the “real” scale of the present tense and the miniaturized scale of the past that we literally hold in our hand.

The soundtracks of the 365 films are in an important sense equally miniaturized in their low density mixes, reduced in most instances to a single thematic sonic element. Even if they are simple soundtracks, the audio environment is inevitably “larger” than the tiny image. It makes the experiential link between body and image, and is key to the effect of fantasy and reverie. Water sounds, animal sounds, traffic sounds, and music samples tend to amplify the spatial parameters of the small screen, giving it a rich sensual overlay. At the same time, they enable a

dimension of interactivity as the viewer can always alter the volume level according to individual comfort levels and audio environments. The 365 films are certainly not designed to be viewed silently, and in this sense, Stewart's notions of visual miniaturization need to be modified in the case of audio-visual web-streamed and iPod cinema. Sounds can be bigger than images, but Onodera's soundtracks "work" best on a medium low setting. There are only a few fragments of dialogue occasionally overheard, and only a scattering of pop song samples to be heard. In most instances, the sound sets up a dialogue with the image as an equal partner, a suggestive counterpoint or imprecise dialogue.

The iPod is after all, or was, in the beginning, a listening device, but with the addition of the screen it becomes a portable cinema. Can it be considered a toy cinema? As an inversion of the Bazinian goal of "total cinema, what "use" does the iPod have? Stewart notes that toys are yet another manifestation of miniaturization, and we know that cinema was presaged by a series of parlor toys—visual devices with which adults entertained themselves before the "cinema" emerged. The iPod has in a sense taken us back to this era, as an instance of what Sobchack describes as a "false cinematic 'primitivism.'"¹³ The automatons and model trains, the dolls and doll houses that also populate the world of toys are, according to Stewart, means of initiating another world—the world of daydream. The world of the toy is "an entirely new temporal world" because in the animation of the inanimate, the inverse is always legible—the proximity of the inanimate world of things to everyday life. Toys constitute the "dead among us" and also ensure the continuation, in miniature, of the world of life "on the other side."¹⁴ Onodera's camera was designed for children, and perhaps the iPod was as well, so what are adults doing with it? Is

it the rabbit shit at the end of the road? The leavings of the technological imagination, finally reconfigured as an inspiration to day dream? Does this project forecast a future in which the immersive

spectacle of total cinema, along with its fiction of the unified subject is abandoned?

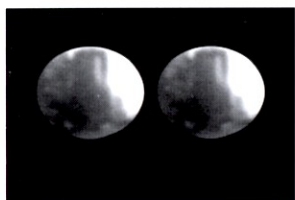
Onodera's 365 films, in their flow and their seriality, and in their toy-like apparatus, constitute another world. As a miniature cinema, outside of time, the project articulates another spatial and temporal world, which is that of digital media—a fragmentary, networked, omnipresent world in which the subject is infinitely dispersed. The world of representations and simulacra is finally transcended, leaving the body stranded in time and space, looking in to an allegory of the desire for transcendence. It points to a time beyond the society of the spectacle. I would describe the project as an allegory of a diary, a construction of everyday life and subjective experience from

a vast and infinite memory bank. The data of dreams, of glimpses and desires, has become detached from its pro-filmic sources and remade in the form of a new, tiny object. Experience has been completely remade and reinvented; the subject of perception in turn is infinitely displaced and deferred. The filmmaker has found herself as a lost and dispersed series of information, statistics, visions and hallucinations in which boredom is endured and revised as digital haiku. Like the ancient poetic form, they are at once beautiful and empty. They are indeed gem-like drawing the viewer into the vast expanse of the microscopic nothingness of the microchip in the box.

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Notes

- 1 David James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties*, (New Brunswick NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989) 12.
- 2 *Lost Lost* is one part of a larger film project called *Diaries Notes and Sketches* that comprises footage shot from 1949 to 1975. Before coming to the United States, Mekas was labeled a "Displaced Person" as a refugee during the war, and he identifies himself as a "DP" in a community of European immigrants displaced by the war within his diary film project.
- 3 Onodera plays the role of a lesbian in *Parallax*, and *Displaced View* is about her Japanese heritage.
- 4 Mekas's 365-film project is available through the Maya Stendhal Gallery at <http://www.jonasmekas.com/inter.html>.
- 5 In a recent documentary about Jonas Mekas, he is seen shooting video constantly, *In the Shadow of the Light* dir. Sarah Payton, 2006.
- 6 Vivian Sobchack, "Nostalgia for the Digital Object: Regrets on the Quickening of Quick Time," *Future Cinema: The Cinematic Imaginary After Film*, Jeffrey Shaw and Peter Weibel eds. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003) 67.
- 7 Sobchack, 67.
- 8 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 44.
- 9 Stewart 41.
- 10 Stewart 45.
- 11 Haidee Wasson, "The Networked Screen: Moving Images, Materiality, and the Aesthetics of Size," in *Fluid Screens, Expanded Cinema*, Janine Marchessault and Susan Lord eds., (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 81.
- 12 Stewart 67.
- 13 Sobchack, 66.
- 14 Stewart 57.



New Media Resistance

Machinima and the Avant-Garde

ELIJAH HORWATT



“Somewhere between the video game and the CD-ROM there could be another way of making films....”

— Jean-Luc Godard¹

It was Jean Cocteau who suggested that the cinema as a pluralistic and egalitarian medium could never come into fruition “until the materials are as cheap as pencil and paper.” The string of technological advances in digital video technology and editing software for the personal computer have steadily brought the cost of filmmaking closer to Cocteau’s utopian vision and no group has adopted these new technologies with the enthusiasm and resourcefulness as avant-garde filmmakers and video artists. It appeared that the avant-garde was continuing a trajectory towards the use of increasingly affordable tools and means of production during the single-channel video art

revolution of the 1970s. Since then however, the possibilities of many new “expanded cinema” technologies has facilitated a movement away from the thrifty art-making tools Cocteau once championed. The latest developments in new media technology do not share the economy that video offered 20 years ago². Much of virtual reality, augmented reality and experimental screening spaces are raising the cost of new media works and narrowing the number of people who may use these new tools. These exciting new technologies surely hold promise for the future of experimental cinema, but they have also drawn attention away from cheaper apparatuses more readily available to financially strapped independent artists.

The success of video art, measured by four decades of innovative work, seems in part attributable to the possibility of camcorders getting into the hands of a diverse group of artists. However the focus of the new media movement has ceased to be the democratizing technological forces that were once central to the avant-garde. Was video, as a cheap apparatus for making folk art, abandoned for the more sophisticated, expensive and more intriguing tools of new media? Indeed, part of the fascination with video art as a medium stemmed from the ability of marginalized people to make art works which radically challenged hegemonic visual discourses in new ways³. Though multi-channel installation works called for enormous allocations of money, single-channel works were an important stream of video art making which offered the most access to (frequently) insolvent artists. It would be fair to say that the video art movement as we know it is predicated in part on its accessibility to people who could not afford to obtain any other cinematic apparatus. The question is, what new technologies will further create spaces for the disenfran-

chised to be involved in cinematic discourse? I will posit that machinima has such democratizing properties. In this sense, I hope to draw parallels to a younger generation of outsider filmmakers, or folk artists, who are engaging with video game culture much the same way video artists once critiqued television. They have aligned themselves in some unusual ways with the video art/avant-garde film movement in their technological ingenuity and their appropriation of extant mass media images all within the expressly cheap confines of the PC or Video game console.

The word machinima (ma-SHIN-i-ma) is a contraction of machine and cinema first coined by the "The Strange Company" film collective; a group of gamers devoted to their own unique version of *détournement* also known as *emergent gameplay* or *metagaming*. These terms refer to playing games in ways contrary to the designer's original intentions. Traditional narrative machinima is created by scripting a story, recording game play within a real time 3D environment (either through the POV of an avatar or through a commonly offered in-game camera feature), using actors to create voice-overs and finally editing the game play and voices to reflect the script. Other techniques of machinima making include improvisation or reprogramming (also known as *modding*) which render scripting, and often voice-over, unnecessary. When completed, machinima looks like 3D animation made through the use of a video game platform (either a console or a PC) and an editing program, however machinima is unlike animation because the 3D engine that controls the images exists within the parameters of a video game. The algorithms of the game detail the behavior of avatars, weather, and environmental boundaries, even providing a sophisticated platform designed to emulate real world Newtonian physics.

Various features have been offered by a diversity of games to give machinimators a wide range of environments and avatars to choose from. Some games and demo programs like *SimLife*, *The Movies*, *Unreal Tournament* and now *Machinimator* allow for the construction of nearly any environment and avatar imaginable. In this sense, machinima does not need to exist in the confines of what would be described as a game—because there ceases to be objectives or goals to playing.

While machinima is often technically in breach of copyright law with its appropriation of video game images, many companies have turned a blind eye because of the free publicity it gives their games or have created regulations to allow for machinima production. Microsoft was so excited about the use of the *Halo* game in the hit machinima show *Red Vs. Blue* (produced by Rooster Teeth Productions) that they created a special machinima license⁴ and a new controller command in the sequel *Halo 3* which

allows players to lower their weapon, a feature "designed solely to make it easier for Rooster Teeth to do dialogue"⁵ as it has no other practical purpose for the game.

Early machinima was gamer oriented, giving practical advice about how to advance to new levels, discover secrets within the game or to reveal strategies and techniques for more successful game play. When films began to imitate the grammar and language of narrative cinema, the films produced were predictably violent, action oriented works exploiting chauvinistic representations and absurd caricatures of masculinity. It is a marvel that anything but the impetus to create a more cinematic spectacle of gratuitous violence has become a dominant facet of the technique, but as I will illustrate, machinima has evolved to become a multifarious technique with its own distinct genres and tendencies.

Machinima's comic possibilities were exploited with the breakout machinima film *Male Restroom Etiquette* (Zarathustra Studios, 2006) which has received nearly five million hits on YouTube and is in the top 100 most viewed films on the site. The film is a sardonic poke at masculinity and gamer culture that has been widely attributed to a boom in the interest in making and watching machinima. *Red Vs. Blue*, a popular machinima show which ran 100 episodes and five seasons, uses absurdist humor to explore the lives of two groups of cynical soldiers engaged in a war without meaning or purpose. The characters pontificate in the appropriated style of Samuel Beckett about the pathos of their task and the triviality of their existence as soldiers. The show has subsequently been used by Microsoft to promote their game console Xbox. Perhaps the most widely distributed machinima is the famous South Park Episode *Make Love Not Warcraft* which follows the South Park characters' avatars in the Warcraft game.

An experimental machinima contingency began to develop with the creation of both *The Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences*⁶, an organization devoted to promoting the use of machinima and heading the Machinima film festival, and *Machinima.com* which provide forums, articles and a film archive for machinima lovers. Machinima is a nascent technological breakthrough which, like video art and avant-garde films before it, radically redefines the means of production associated with traditional narrative filmmaking. The techniques employed to create many machinima films resemble avant-garde film practices; the films have a collage aesthetic, they appropriate both the images of another medium as well as the discursive and narrative strategies of video game culture, they are acts of *détournement* or media resistance often entrenched in radical politics and they are made on a shoe-string budget. For all these reasons, the process of machinima captured the

attention of avant-garde artists and a number of open minded outsiders to begin exploring machinima's abstract and non-narrative potential.

While machinima resembles found-footage filmmaking in its appropriation of extant images and sounds, there are some notable differences. Instead of full fledged cinematic appropriations, machinima employs digitally appropriated environments, avatars, background stories and even pre-rendered sequences. Unlike traditional found footage films, the content within the 3D environment is highly malleable and needs to be created. While the films are often engaged in a critique of video games the same way video art was engaged with television, this critique is not a necessary attribute of machinima. Though there is a bifurcation between machinima art as a critique of video games and as a cheap platform for cinematic expression, the avant-garde community has employed the technique to serve both ends. This is not necessarily the case with mainstream machinima, evinced in the words of machinima pioneer Hugh Hancock⁷ when he said "Machinima seems to be the only way that someone like me is going to get to produce stories on the scale I want without having to spend 35 years working my way up in the TV or film industry."⁸

Despite a strong community of experimental and avant-garde filmmakers, Hancock's sentiment seems to ring true for most mainstream machinima. Though the technique and technology help artists work outside of Hollywood modes of production, those involved are often attempting to work within the aesthetic and narrative constructions of contemporary Hollywood cinema. Critic Leo Berkeley reiterates these issues when he writes "In an era where the narrative possibilities of interactive, hypertextual and virtual environments are opening up but have only been tentatively explored, machinima most commonly makes use of the increasingly sophisticated interactive features of recent 3D computer games to produce texts that are predominantly traditional linear narratives. It is a strangely hybrid form, looking both forwards and backwards, cutting edge and conservative at the same time."⁹ However Berkeley also cites critics Bolter and Grusin, who suggest that new media forms do not simply emerge and replace old forms—they often borrow the discursive techniques of contemporary and old media forms before innovation can occur¹⁰. Right now a tug-of-war over the future of machinima is playing out across the internet with some, like Experimental Game Lab at Georgia Tech member Michael Nitsche proposing that machinima explore non-narrative possibilities¹¹. Most machinima theorists and pioneers are ambivalent about the move toward experimental machinima. Though many are fascinated with new possibilities they are still keen publicists and know that machinima has a brighter (and more profitable) future in its narrative form. The three most well known books on machinima, *Machinima* (Morris, Kelland, and Lloyd 2005) *3-D Game Based Filmmaking: The Art of Machinima* (Marino 2004) and *Machinima for Dummies* (Hancock and Ingram, 2007) all focus on the narrative

aspects of machinima filmmaking with little or no discussion about potential non-narrative films.

When talking about new media, there is a tendency to romanticize burgeoning technologies which appear to democratize the medium as the *savior du jour* of avant-garde/experimental cinema. Critic David Ross invokes Bertolt Brecht's seminal media essay "The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication" and reminds us that we often herald new forms of media because of our own utopian expectations of what it will carry. In Brecht's words, "these people who have a high opinion of radio have it because they see in it something for which 'something' can be invented. They would see themselves justified."¹² So rather than simply herald the many possibilities of machinima, I will cite examples of why machinima is worthy of study.

The numerous machinima films which *détourn* video games may seem like a specialized if not superfluous form of media resistance. However the preponderance of personal video game consuls has become so widespread that it has begun to have a ubiquity in the lives of many people, approaching that of television fifty years ago. Over 117 million Americans are counted as "active gamers" by the Nielsen Active Gamer Study of 2005 which surveyed American gamers who played more than one hour per week. Among its findings it was discovered that "although teenagers continue to comprise the largest percentage (40%) of Active Gamers, more than 15 million of these gamers (almost 8%) are now 45 years or older, with the average age of a gamer at 30 years-old. While women make up nearly two-thirds of all online gamers, men still outnumber women in the overall video game universe by more than two-to-one."¹³ In 2003, the industry made 28 billion in revenues and has had a growth rate of 20% since 2002. While machinima appears at first glance to be an example of fan fiction, many works produced with the technique are radical critiques of video games, attempting to redefine the politics and ideology of video game culture rather than praise it. In this way, machinima appears to be a striking example of a grass-roots media resistance movement engaging critically with culture and production. Gamers love to cite statistics comparing the *Halo* series, which made 170 million dollars on the day of release to blockbuster films like *Spider-Man 2* which only made 40 million on its first day.¹⁴ The preponderance of these comparisons, (especially in machinima films *about* machinima filmmaking) solidifies the machinimators desire to link gaming as a cultural artifact worthy of academic study on equal footing with cinema.

One way of situating machinima in relationship to new media is to consider its privileged position in the critique of video game culture with the tools of the medium and the insights of those closest to it. Critic and theorist McKenzie Wark has devoted a number of theoretical tracts to gaming culture¹⁵ and has become an important figure among the machinima intelligentsia as evinced by his interview on the

machinima talk show *This Spartan Life*. The show, which nods ironically in its title to the national public radio show *This American Life*, has become the *Johnny Carson Show* of machinimators all the world over. The show follows a host who interviews significant media theoreticians, avant-garde artists and open source programmers inside the violent *Halo 3* game. The game has attracted Criterion Collection creator and Voyager Company founder Bob Stein and avant-garde found footage filmmaker Peggy Ahwesh to come onto the show and discuss issues surrounding new media, the future of digital information and the process of machinima itself. The dramatic tension of the show is centered around the fact that interviews are suddenly over if the guest's avatar is killed by another player. The creators have had to enlist professional gamers to act as bodyguards to prevent the rising number of individuals bent on disrupting the show by killing all of the guests. The show subverts the *Halo 3* game by turning it into a place where people who are separated geographically can come together in a digital world to hold talks and even debate serious issues as opposed to using it as a playground for gratuitous violence.

Machinima and the Avant-Garde

The most surprising development in the machinima world so far was the use of the technique by avant-garde filmmakers Peggy Ahwesh and Phil Solomon. Ahwesh's *She Puppet* (2001) destabilizes the programmed expectations of how one is "supposed" to play the game *Tomb Raider*; chipping away at the violent and sexist representation of "Lara Croft" the sexually idealized protagonist of the game. Ahwesh describes Croft as "a collection of cones and cylinders — not a human at all— most worthy as a repository for our post-feminist fantasies of adventure, sex and violence without consequence. The limited inventory of her gestures and the militaristic rigor of the game strategies created for her by the programmers is a repetition compulsion of sorts, offering some kind of cyberagency and cyberprowess for the player."¹⁶

In *She Puppet*, Lara Croft shoots at non-existent enemies and is subject to numerous moments of what Ahwesh calls "ecstatic death." In some sense, Ahwesh is giving Croft the radical subjectivity imbued by feminism—allowing the character to act in ways, we perceive, she has not been designed to. Ahwesh's construction of Croft doesn't adhere to the oppressive regulations of the game, even though she works within the programmed algorithms. Jonathan Miller called this use of the avatar an "image of liberation that points the way to a wholly human ideal."¹⁷ Ahwesh also forces the viewer to consider the male dominated world of gaming in which men use an idealized female body as their avatar—creating a kind of transsexual space for game play.

While Ahwesh is clearly engaged in a critique of video games in her machinima, Phil Solomon's work in the medium has an entirely different purpose. This purpose relates to machinima's prospects as a democratizing and economically viable form of new media. Solomon's machinima films

Untitled (for David Gatten) made with Mark LaPore in 2005 and *Rehearsals for Retirement* (2007) take place in the controversial *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* game. In *Untitled (for David Gatten)* Solomon and LaPore use *glitching*, a process of finding program errors (freezing, data corruption, physical impossibilities within the algorithms of the game) and exposing them. The avatar in their machinima repeatedly attempts to cross the physical barrier in the game creating colorful trails of the game's landscape. As these films are difficult to find, I rely on critic Michael Sicinski, who describes the images produced as an "unglued forest landscape, sending dripping, elongated textures and blotches of green hurtling towards the screen. But these blades of grass, even as they become mere paint-pixels, are shifted and rotated, sometimes becoming the shafts of trees, other times mere planar forms which intersect with one another and the figure himself. We are in a dense thicket of interpenetrating fields and illegible perspectives."¹⁸ *Rehearsals for Retirement* utilizes more traditional cinematic techniques while continuing to use glitching. Sicinski again writes "In the opening sequence, we find ourselves reverse-tracking away from a wood-rail fence in a forest clearing. Patches of the ground beneath us fall away into fractal-like black holes; patchy blue-green mists form rotating, 3-D volumes of gas. The trunk of a tree becomes a waterfall in the distance. Like the middle section of *Untitled*, this is a space of indeterminate legibility, comprised of planes upon planes, yet the tracking shot also hints at a certain level of spatial control, a touchstone of the cinema of old."¹⁹ While the images play with the barriers of game space, they are focused on the aesthetic results of glitching rather than its relationship to game play. Solomon sees the beautiful possibilities inherent in playing the game in different ways and forcing the program to produce images that aren't ordinarily part of the game.

Avant-garde machinimator Eddo Stern has compiled what must be the largest and most sophisticated body of political machinima to date. His films, installations and performances grapple with torture, simulation, military games as well as a host of geopolitical disputes with machinima produced images. A prolific video artist, member of the now defunct downtown LA media collective C-Level and a former faculty member of USC's Interactive Media Division, Stern has approached gaming culture in some fascinating ways. His work in the Hammer Museum's "Fair Use: Appropriation in Recent Film and Video" exhibit explored the preponderance of video games dealing with terrorism after the September 11th Attacks. In Stern's own words "After 9/11, there was an initial knee-jerk reaction to step away from reality in gaming...people didn't want to belittle the situation. But that shock only lasted a short time. Then it was just, 'Fuck it, let's go kill them.'"²⁰ Stern uses these images to explore the political and ideological messages of video games and how history and cultural experience are formed through game play.

Stern's gaming "interventions" are as interested in

shaping video game culture as they are in exploring it. His work amplifies the strange relationship between reality and simulation available to video game modifiers or *modders* in a variety of ways. The economic advantages of machinima are secondary to Stern; he is more interested in using the inherent language of video games as material to explore through machinima. The ideologies and politics of video games make up most of his work, which augment the subtexts of games until they are either absurd or monstrous. In the *Tekken Torture Tournament* (2001) performance, “32 willing participants received bracing but non-lethal electrical shocks in correspondence to the injuries sustained by their onscreen avatars. Players wore shocking arm straps wired through a hardware/software hack of the world’s most popular fighting Playstation game *TEKKEN 3*.”²¹ In *Waco Resurrection* the player’s avatar is a revived David Koresh who walks through Waco surrounded by ethereal hellfire fighting the FBI and ATF. His film *Deathstar* which played at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2004 is an assemblage of digitally rendered homicidal fantasies concerning Osama bin Laden from online video games set to the music of *The Passion of the Christ*. The music, according to one critic “subverts the programmers’ intent, insisting we view bin Laden as a Christ-like figure amidst all the maiming.”²² *Vietnam Romance* recreates scenes from iconic Vietnam War films using video game generated images and MIDI sound files that correspond to the songs which played over the cinematic scenes. He uses *Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City* to recreate scenes of Vietnamese prostitution in *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) with a MIDI version of Nancy Sinatra’s *These Boots are Made for Walkin’*. Stern goes on to recreate the cinematic memory of Vietnam from the Huey attack scene from *Apocalypse Now* (1979) featuring Wagner’s *Ride of the Valkyries* to the introduction scenes of *M*A*S*H* (1970) with the song *Suicide is Painless*.

More recently, Stern has turned his eye towards Los Angeles with *Landlord Vigilante* (2006) where a cynical landlady who believes tenants are “defective human beings,” instigates an urban war on criminal elements in East LA. The story is based on Stern and collaborator Jessica Hutchins’ own exploitative landlady in Los Angeles. Stern, like Phil Solomon uses *Grand Theft Auto* and plays with the documentary properties of the game platform—which explores gang culture in a simulated Los Angeles. Eddo’s game is ostensibly a revenge scenario allowing afflicted tenants to sublimate their violent desires towards their landlords into the gaming sphere.

“Outsider” Experimental Machinima

Many artists have attempted to make experimental machinima outside of the highly contested grouping of artists we call the “avant-garde.” Referring to these individuals as “outsiders” seems ironic because they tend to be more invested in the form than their avant-garde counterparts, however they tend to be gamers, programmers, glitchers and modders who’ve developed an interest in

non-narrative possibilities for machinima. Though this tendency is late breaking in the machinima community, it has developed a significant following. Digital curator Carl Goodman of the American Museum of Moving Images commented on machinimators in 2002 saying “What enables them to do all this is also what limits them in the end. At one extreme you have action movies and at the other you have the story that all young boys tell when they play with action figures.”²³ Much has changed in the last six years. While the earliest entries into the machinima canon betray just the kind of narrative and aesthetic preferences one might ascribe to the average gamer, machinimators have increasingly employed non-narrative strategies to films which reflect some prototypical avant-garde practices. Though this group is a fringe of the machinima movement, these experimental machinima films are often touted by pioneers and machinima communities as examples that lend a new kind of legitimacy to the technique.²⁴

Ozymandias (2001), a characteristically avant-garde machinima film was made by Strange Films and is based on the Percy Shelly poem of the same name. The film features a single poetic image which takes on the narrative exposition of Shelly’s text with a presentation of the poem at the end of the film. The work captured the attention of New York Times arts columnist Matthew Mirapaul and critic Roger Ebert, both of whom remarked on the incredible new possibilities the medium had to offer. Friedrich Kirschner, a filmmaker with *Moppi Productins* works with creatively elastic demo engines to make some of the most respected works of experimental machinima, *The Journey*, *Halla*, *Person 2184* and *IX*. The films have oblique narratives which have startlingly original images and metaphoric properties. Using abstract humanoid figures, Kirschner creates cold multi-layered landscapes with overlapping images and a nightmarish futuristic perspective where advertising bombards the individual. His films obliquely grapple with the pervasive commercial images of the *Society of the Spectacle* and the increasing difficulty of individuality in a world that seeks to instate conformity.

Political Machinima

Most works of political machinima are left wing in nature save some pro-military war reenactments which recreate military operations in various historical theaters of war. A number of clans (social groups that play together via the internet) have developed around mutual political or personal affiliations. A notable example is the preponderance of gay gamer clans, also known as *Gaymers*²⁵. Left wing political machinima films have become more frequent and grabbed the attention of many new media scholars. Many critics were captivated by *The French Democracy* (2005)²⁶ which detailed the events and situations which led up to the French suburb riots of October 2005. The film itself was made from the perspective of a young Parisian on the events that precipitated the riots in France—with recreations of the deaths which sparked the riots themselves.

The filmmaker Alex Chan, a first generation French Buddhist, made the film “to correct what was being said in the media, especially in the United States, who linked what was happening, the riots, to terrorism and put the blame on the Muslim community.”²⁷ The film detailed the violent response of three black youths to the many acts of harassment and bias faced by young immigrants around Paris. The film was discussed by a slew of reporters after receiving a million hits in a month.²⁸ Though Chan was an inexperienced machinima maker and the film itself has little merit stylistically or technically, the film is emblematic of the instant exposure machinima can offer those without a traditional filmmaking apparatus.

This kind of political pseudo-documentary style was copied by Joshua Garrison in his rendering of the Virginia Tech Massacre with the Halo 3 game engine. This controversial work is a thoughtful political invective against violence, using the engine to recreate the events of the massacre punctuated by title cards explaining details of the massacre and the systemic failings that contributed to the killer’s success.

An *Unfair War* (2006) made by Thuyen Nguyen is an austere five minute short exploring the personal effects of war. A Middle-Eastern man is sitting at his computer in an empty house with the sound of gunfire blasts in the background. He’s writing a letter (the words he types appear at the bottom of the screen) about how his family has fled the country and the peril they face on their journey. He has stayed behind to document the events that occur. Though never explicit, the man is clearly an Iraqi citizen living among a rival sect. His ambivalence about the war is iterated in lines like “I do not care if I am ‘defended’ or ‘liberated.’ I just want my life back” and “whoever wins this war will claim a once-beautiful country which has been reduced to nothing.” The gunfire crescendos until it is deafening. The man pauses and the screen fades to black with the sound of a blast. The film ends with a quote from Mahatma Gandhi: “What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans and the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or the holy name of liberty or democracy?” The pathos of the subject seems to communicate the ambivalent attitudes towards “liberation” articulated by many Iraqis—what good is freedom if survival is impossible? This work seems to echo *The French Democracy* with a filmmaker attempting to speak for those who cannot. In this way machinima allows people to bear witness to events with tools they otherwise couldn’t afford.

The Tyrant (2006), a machinima mash-up film made by Mike Munson with the Half-Life 2 game engine utilizes a special “skin builder” which allows players to design the faces of their avatars. Munson designed a George W. Bush avatar and employs the same techniques many political mash-up filmmakers have—re-editing speeches by political figures so that there is coalescence between what they say and what they actually do. The speech made by the

avatar is a cut up version of Bush speeches constructed into a single cohesive monologue. This process has been referred to by the artist and writer Jonathan McIntosh as “identity correction.”

The Machinima “Documentary”

Some machinima filmmakers have taken to documenting the world within a game by incorporating an outsider perspective and looking at the video game world through the eyes of an anthropologist. These films have a mockumentary quality to them, incorporating humor and absurdity though remaining loyal to the spirit of the games they investigate. In Jim Munroe’s machinima film *My Trip to Liberty City* (2004), we are taken on a tour of the landscape of the *Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City* (GTA: LC) world. Munroe describes the city over clips of his avatar’s exploration. After his avatar is called upon to carry out an illicit job by a crime lord, Munroe decides instead to explore the city. His running monologue over the film is more befitting of a family slide show of vacation photos than the absurd violence of the game’s narrative, which clashes with his own curiosity about the world of the city. Realizing that his thuggish character may be misleading those around him, Munroe decides to “change skins” and be the Canadian tourist he feels more adequately represents himself. After changing into a heavy set balding man with a camera around his neck, Munroe explores the city on foot because, in his words, “I never feel like getting into a car is the best way to see a city. The best way is to walk around and get to know it. For instance here if found this little nook in an alley and sure enough there’s a stairwell there that leads up to this beautiful rooftop; something I never would have found in a car.” Munroe’s exploration of the digital space of *GTA: LC* has the same outsider perspective and proposed audience as other machinima “documentaries.” It does not use the lingua franca of gamer-made machinima films, nor does it have the insider humor of shows like *Red Vs Blue*. Instead, *My Trip to Liberty City* has some elements in common with the work of video artist Mike Hoolboom, who refers to his work in the 1990s as “documentaries of the imaginary.”²⁹ In this sense, the imaginary space of a game is explored with the appropriated discourses of a documentary.

Machinimator Douglas Gayeton purports to have “found” the video diaries of Molotov Alva, a man who supposedly evaporated from real life and reappeared in the popular computer world *Second Life*. These films claim to be “dispatches” from the *Second Life* world, from a man who has left reality and entered simulation forever. The film has become the object of much discussion after its purchase by HBO for broadcast in 2008 and was entered into the Academy Award’s short film competition for 2007.

Machinima and New Media Resistance

The most striking aspect of machinima may come from its origins and development outside of the formal avant-garde community. It has developed through the ingenuity of

hackers, modders, gamers and cinephiles. Not all new media is employed as a means of a bottom-up media critique—it is most often the province of artworks rooted in the visual discourse of the medium being critiqued. However machinima is unique because of the origins of the technique, developed by individuals who wanted to engage with hegemonic visual discourses of video games because it was the visual language they were most familiar with and they had important things to say about the culture as a whole.

The term media resistance has been most closely allied with activist documentary, video and avant-garde art, however it is increasingly the domain of amateur content creators on the Internet. I would attribute this development not only to a steady reduction in the cost of recording equipment and editing software, but also to the proliferation of extant media materials on the Internet whether they be in the form of digital video files or images produced from game engines. A critical analysis often appears at the root of appropriated and reconfigured images—observable by how the artist relates to the source material and the various modifications they execute. Many found footage filmmakers and video artists describe the process of appropriating materials and manipulating them as a form of retribution or resistance. Nam June Paik once said that “Television has been attacking us all our lives, now we can attack it back.”³⁰ Now millions of gamers are going to have their turn.

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Notes

- 1 Jean Luc-Godard and Youssef Ishaghpour, “Part I Interview,” *Cinema*, (Berg 2005, 3-112.): 38-39
- 2 For an in depth explanation of how video became more economical for artists during the late 1970s please see Catherine Elwes. *Video Art, A Guided Tour*. (I.B. Tauris & Co: London, 2005): 19.
- 3 These critiques are evinced in the work of Sadie Benning, Dara Birnbaum, and Candice Breitz.
- 4 The license stipulates that derivative works may be made from Microsoft's Xbox console if they are for personal and non-commercial use. For details of the license visit <http://www.xbox.com/en-US/community/developer/rules.htm>
- 5 Thompson, Clive. “The X-Box Auteurs” *New York Times Magazine* August 7th, 2005. (http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/07/magazine/07MAC.HINI.html?_r=2&pagewanted=1&oref=slogin)
- 6 The Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences should also be understood as an example of machinimators attempting to identify themselves with the Hollywood film organization *The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences*. Visit www.machinima.org
- 7 Hancock is also the man responsible for coining the word “machinima” and actually misspelling the contraction which should be “machinema.” He is currently on the board of directors of *The Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences*.
- 8 Mirapaul, Matthew. “Arts Online: Computer Games as the Tools for Digital Filmmakers.” *New York Times*, July 22nd, 2002.
- 9 Berkeley, Leo. “Situation Machinima in the New Mediascape.” *Australian Journal of Emerging Technologies and Society*. Vol. 4, No. 2, 2006, pp: 65-80
- 10 Bolter, J.D. & Grusin, R. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. (The MIT Press, Cambridge MA & London, 1999). Op. Cit. Berely, Leo. “Situation Machinima in the New Mediascape.”
- 11 Michael Nitsche explores these issues often in his *Free Pixel* blog, specifically in the post “What Makes Machinima Good?” @ <http://gtmachinimablog.lcc.gatech.edu/?p=56#more-56>
- 12 Ross, David. “Truth or Consequences: American Television and Video Art.” *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*. Ed. John Hanhardt. (Peregrine Smith Books: Layton, 1986): 172.
- 13 Takahashi, Dean. “Nielson Entertainment Releases Study on Gamers.” *San Francisco Mercury News*, October 5th, 2006. (http://blogs.mercurynews.com/aei/2006/10/nielsen_ente_rta.html)
- 14 Flew, Terry. *New Media: An Introduction*. (Oxford University Press, New York: 2005): 101
- 15 His most famous work in this area is *Gamer Theory*.
- 16 Ahwesh, Peggy. “Lara Croft: Tomb Raider” *Film Comment* 37.4, p. 77.
- 17 Miller, Jonathan. “Peggy Awesh” on Eight Forty Eight heard on Chicago Public Radio. (<http://chicagopublicradio.org/content.aspx?audioID=10354>)
- 18 Sicinski, Michael. “Phil Solomon Visits San Andreas and Escapes, Not Unscathed: Notes on Two Recent Works” *CinemaScope Magazine* Issue 30, 2007.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Willis, Holly. *The Military Games People Play*. *LA Weekly*. March 30th, 2005. (<http://www.laweekly.com/art+books/art/the-military-games-people-play/798/>)
- 21 http://www.eddostern.com/tekken_torture_tournament.html
- 22 Temple, Kevin. “Sensational Stern: Installations Show How Violence Amuses” *Now Magazine*. Vol. 23, #43, 2004. (http://www.eddostern.com/texts/toronto%20NOW/art_reviews.php.html)
- 23 Mirapaul, Matthew. “Arts Online: Computer Games as the Tools for Digital Filmmakers.”
- 24 Machinima.com, the distribution portal of the “Academy of Machinima Arts and Sciences” names three experimental/non-narrative machinima films in their “best machinima” category. Any comprehensive search for the top 10 machinima films tends to name several iconic experimental machinima films, most frequently those by Friedrich Kirschner.
- 25 See the blog made exclusively for Gaymers: <http://gaygamer.net>
- 26 This film may be viewed at <http://www.machinima.com/film/view&id=1407>.
- 27 Diderich, Joelle. “French film about riots draws applause.” *Associated Press*. Dec. 14th, 2005. (http://www.usatoday.com/tech/gaming/2005-12-15-french-riots-film_x.htm)
- 28 *Business Week*, “France: Thousands of Young Spielbergs.” December 19th, 2005.
- 29 Elwes, Catherine. *Video Art, A Guided Tour*. (I.B. Tauris & Co: London, 2005.): 187
- 30 Ibid: 5

The Reality of Dreams

A presentation of *L'Ange et la femme* (1977)

PETER HARCOURT

On Saturday February 10, 2007, Montreal's *La Presse* published a survey of the 50 best québécois films of all time. Compiled from shorter lists prepared by local film personnel, both filmmakers and commentators, this project offered few surprises. At the top there was still Claude Jutra's rendering of a story by Clément Perron, *Mon oncle Antoine* (1971); Francis Mankiewicz's direction of a script by Réjean Ducharme, *Les bons débarras* (1980); and Michel Brault's fictionalized distillation of the testimonies of some 50 Quebec citizens who had been imprisoned during the

political crisis of 1970, *Les Ordres* (1974). (Incidentally, Brault was cinematographer on the first two films as, along with François Protat, he also was for *Les Ordres*.)

Of the established directors, Gilles Carle and Denys Arcand clocked in with five titles each while Jean Pierre Lefebvre merited only one mention for *Les dernières fiançailles* (1973). One anglophone title made the cut—*Thirty-Two Short Films About Glenn Gould* (1993), directed by François Girard; but—and this was a surprise—there was no mention at all of anything by Léa Pool.

L'Ange et la femme



Since the 1970s, however, as the list established, the cinema of Quebec has migrated from a focus on politics to a focus on pleasure. It has shifted from a preoccupation with cultural self-definition to the more relaxed values of personal entertainment. Individual alienation has been absorbed within the concatenations of family life.

Of course, *Mon oncle Antoine* and *Les bon débarras* also involved families; but by the time we get to *C.R.A.Z.Y.* (2005), the only discernable politics are the politics of sexual difference; and in *La grande séduction* (aka *Seducing Dr. Lewis*, 2003), delightful though it be, there is as much politics as in an Ealing comedy such as *Whiskey Galore* (1949).

All aspects of life, however, involve politics of some kind, at least at the level of ideological assumption. The assumptions concerning québécois notions of masculinity are there to be analyzed, if one so desires, in the immensely popular tetralogy, *Les Boys* (1997–2005), now living on as a television series; but in recent years among theatrical features, except for the work of Denys Arcand and of Philippe Falardeau's *La moitié gauche du frigo* (2000), an involvement with the political implications of québécois life has virtually disappeared from Canadian screens.

This shift of focus was encouraged by the actual politics of the province of Quebec. With the election of René Lévesque's *Parti Québécois* in 1976, Quebec artists became less involved with the political details of everyday life. Certainly, the election of the *Parti Québécois* affected the thinking of Gilles Carle.

Although his early films may have been conceptually chaotic,¹ they all focused on political realities, generally in terms of characters seeking to free themselves from the inadequacy of inherited myths. As James Leach once argued: "The movement from being exploited to becoming aware is basic to all of Carle's films ..."² But after 1976, Carle decided to revive an idea he had had as a teenager: he wanted to devise a romantic fairy-tale for film. As he later explained, speaking about *L'Ange et la femme*:

This film doesn't reflect our social reality, which is not to say it lacks cultural roots. Not at all! It's a nordic film full of québécois imagery.³

Turning his back on the economic models of the Canadian film industry, Carle assembled a group of film people who were prepared to invest their salaries in the production and, working intermittently over five weeks, produce this film in 16mm black-&-white for only \$75,000.⁴

Owing largely to the intimate relationship between Carole Laure and Lewis Furey, both on and off screen, the première of *L'Ange* was bathed in scandal. The québécois press was almost totally dismissive. The review in *Le Devoir* was relentless, claiming it was the worst film Carle had ever made.⁵ Only Serge Losique, the director of Montreal's World Film Festival, leapt to its defense. He found the film "well structured, well directed and worthy of a filmmaker



who has made the québécois cinema so well known throughout the world."⁶

But it took the international press to acknowledge the achievement of the film. In 1978, it was awarded the critics' prize at the Festival international de cinéma fantastique in Avoriaz in the Alps, with juror Fernand Arrabal claiming that it was the *best* film that Carle had ever made. Fellow jurors such as Jeanne Moreau and Alain Delon agreed that *L'Ange* is "... a beautiful poem about love and death."⁷ But perhaps the most helpful suggestion might be to think of it in terms of the dream-like fantasy of Jean Cocteau's *La Belle et la Bête* (1946).

The Film

L'Ange et la femme begins with a montage of images. A close-up of a machine gun moves left to centre screen and fires, after which we see three snowmobilers roaring away. Then in long-shot, a young woman tumbles down a snowy slope, rolling over and over as she falls. Finally, we hear Lewis Furey's plangent music as the titles begin, interspersed with



further bits of montage: the dead woman (Laure), lying in the snow; a sinister man preparing a hypodermic needle; Laure singing topless in a bar salon, which we might recognize as a scene from Carle's *La Mort d'un bûcheron* (1973); and then the titles end.

This opening sequence establishes both the social surround of the film and its informing aesthetic. First of all, there is the mechanized violence of the machine gun and snowmobiles, re-enforced by the sinister preparation of the hypodermic needle. Secondly, possibly reminiscent of the collapsing chimney at the opening of Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un poète* (1930), the extended fall down the snowy slope might suggest that the following film will be a dream.

The Angel appears (Lewis Furey) whom we'll later know as Gabriel, and picks up the Woman (Carole Laure) whom we'll know as Fabienne. To the sound of a wintry wind, he carries her off to his rural hide-away, passing by a graveyard on the way.

After this opening preface, the film is divided into three chapters, each with a proclamatory title. The first, *La Morte*

n'existe pas (Death doesn't exist), establishes Gabriel's magical powers over life and his desire to weave the beautiful Fabienne into his fantasy of a pastoral retreat.

His habitat abounds with relics. A stuffed owl figures prominently within the imagery of the film, increasingly symptomatic of how Fabienne will come to feel; but equally significant are the reptiles preserved in glass cages, their bones echoing Fabienne's beautiful spine which, throughout the film, is in dialogue with the allure of her breasts.

By blowing his magical smoke at her, Gabriel cures her wounds—on her eye, hand, and breast. Then like Prince Charming, he breathes life into her, awakening her from her deep sleep of death. Throughout these moments as elsewhere in the film there are shots of erotic paintings: Goya's "Maja," both clothed and unclothed; coital penetration in its many variations; a naked woman squatting on a mat as if charming a snake, except the snake is a penis. These images represent an iconic history of desire, to which Carle wishes to add his erotic fairy tale.

All these effects might seem like high kitsch were it not



La Vrai nature de Bernadette

for the delicacy of the cinematic imagery. Assisted by the expert eye of François Protat, Carle's black-&-white cinematography suggests the stylizations of a silent film. Dazzling light shines through the windows, creating chiaroscuro effects inside.

Throughout *L'Ange et la femme*, random incidents abound. While sitting at the breakfast table like a respectable married couple, Gabriel observes that Fabienne has lost her memory. "What is memory?" she enquires. "It's what the mind retains," he explains. "Memory is the source of desire." He then begins to instruct her in the naming of things.

When he fetches her clothes, she tries them on, one after another, her breasts always displayed for us, ending up with a fur wrap around her shoulders and an ornate cap on her head, looking like a topless Theda Bara.

Apparently, her amnesia facilitates her learning the piano. She is soon playing Bach, with Gabriel singing along, Glenn Gould style. But the more she acquires language, the more she remembers; and the more she remembers, the more she wants to get away.

After a visit by his parents who, apparently, are dead, he

begins to make love to her. "Everyone should die many times," he pontificates. "Death empties the mind of all that is ugly—allowing for a place of beauty." In the middle of love-making, we cut away to them fully clothed, playing out their passion through the music—she on the piano, he on his violin. When they return to their love-making, the sounds of a choir provide the afflatus necessary to lift her towards her desired ecstasy.

After some playful scenes in the snow, Fabienne gets restless again. She wants to return to her former life—whatever it might have been. As if in compromise, Gabriel invites some friends from the city, and the second chapter of this film begins—*La Vie n'existe pas* (Life doesn't exist).

But the friends from the city are also dead. They entertain their hosts by describing the rapture of their own demises—except for Stephen Lack who, with irreverent aplomb, offers a cosmological account of the relationship of self to the divine.

Further scenes in the snow occur, at one time with Gabriel by a horse as if a nordic Sheik of Araby. Fabienne wants to acquire his magic but discovers that, while he can create life, she can only burn things. When back in the house, as her prancing about is intercut with further shots from *La Mort d'un bûcheron*, she remembers she was a dancer. She wants to return to her real life even though Gabriel insists it doesn't exist, that nothing but beauty exists. "The rest is only in your imagination."

Logically, of course—but there is never much logic in the films of Gilles Carle—what Fabienne wants is to revisit a life independent of the dream-world created for her by Gabriel. As the final chapter of the film begins—*Rien n'existe* (Nothing exists)—we see them driving into Montreal through the *grisaille* of a cold winter day. When Gabriel threatens to take her back to the country, she leaps out of the car and into the metro. A nightmarish sequence follows as she transfers from carriage to carriage and line to line only to exit where she had entered—at la Place des Arts!

Dealing with incidents from the film in this way, reducing everything to words, *L'Ange et la femme* might seem ridiculous. But it doesn't *feel* ridiculous while watching it. Through a felicitous juxtaposition of images and from the passion of their creation, the film acquires its own kind of oneiric authority.

Fabienne remembers a house and four men whom she worked for. Evidently as a dancer she had said "strange and crazy things" in their clubs: she mourned over Chile; she believes that all doctors, architects, and urbanists are criminals; and, repeating a line that Gabriel had already taught her to recite, she once declared: "The greatest fear is of loving and being loved."⁸ We have seen flashes of these moments elsewhere in the film as her memory struggled to establish itself. Now, finally, we are presented with what might be described as the real time of the film.

The real time of the film is a time of male control, of male intolerance, and of male violence. She thinks she can destroy these people but her magic is not strong enough;

and Gabriel cannot help her because his magic is powerless over hate.

The men grab her, gag her, drug her, and drive her out of town. They are going to kill her in the snow. Thus *L'Ange et la femme* returns to its beginning, ending with Fabienne tumbling down that snowy slope. End of film. End of dream.

Conclusion

A poetic parenthesis within the québécois cinema of the 1970s, *L'Ange et la femme* quickly vanished from view. It appears on nobody's top ten list. There is no decent print of the film, not even at the Cinémathèque Québécoise. There is no DVD.⁹

Apparently endorsing the adolescent notion that the only meaning of life resides in love and art, the actual view of life inscribed within *L'Ange et la femme* is, ultimately, one of social despair. Back in 1976, Piers Handling suggested that, "on the evidence of the films his view is becoming bleaker and more despairing."¹⁰ In *L'Ange*, the circularity of the form enacts this despair. The film begins and ends with death, within which is a dream—a dream of love and art but also one full of irrational discrepancies, such as the Japanese chauffeur practising Tai Chi in the snow.

Lacking any causal role in the film, the chauffeur is suggestive of something wayward, of something strange. Like the fruit that hangs like mobiles throughout *La vraie nature de Bernadette* (1972), such unattached images are surreal because, narratively, they don't make sense.

Summing up Carle's work, David Clandfield has suggested that

Carle's films are a display-case for the fantasies, formative myths, and political preoccupations of the artistic intelligentsia of his generation in Quebec. The heterogeneity of the work recalls the surrealists' refusal of fixed genres and their interlacing of laughter, fear, and desire in order to discomfit the bourgeois spectator seeking relaxation and certainty.¹¹

Unquestionably, Carle's early films are among the most imaginative within québécois cinema. Resisting confident analyses and tidy explanations, they have made an enormous contribution to film culture in Quebec. And unique amongst them is the sometimes silly but always beautiful dream of celebratory love represented by *L'Ange et la femme*. It ought to be better known.

Peter Harcourt has written extensively on Canadian cinema and on the films of Jean-Luc Godard. He lives in Ottawa.

Notes

- 1 See "Images of the Rural: The Cinema of Quebec," by Peter Harcourt. *CineAction* 69, 2006, pp. 2-11
- 2 "The Sins of Gilles Carle," by James Leach. *Cinema Canada*



La Mort d'un bûcheron

36 (March 1977), reprinted in *Take Two—A Tribute to Film in Canada*, ed. by Seth Feldman (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1984), p.164

- 3 Talking with André Leroux in *Le Devoir* (9 April 1977), cited in *Gilles Carle: Dossier de presse, 1962-1981* (Bibliothèque du Séminaire de Sherbrooke, 1981), 132 pp., unpaginated
- 4 See the account by Luc Perrault in *La Presse* (16 April 1977), cited in *Gilles Carle: Dossier de presse*
- 5 *Le Devoir* (16 April 1977), in an unsigned review which was undoubtedly written by Jean-Pierre Tadros; cited in *Gilles Carle: Dossier de presse*
- 6 *Le Devoir* (26 April 1977), cited in *Gilles Carle: Dossier de presse*
- 7 "Divine Intervention," by Gilbert Moore. *The Montreal Star*, January 28, 1978; cited in *Gilles Carle: Dossier de presse*
- 8 From psychiatrist David Cooper's *The Death of the Family* (1971)
- 9 For the final stages of this article, I have been helped enormously by a personal DVD lent to me, through a friend, by R.S.L Productions
- 10 "Gilles Carle—a Thematic Response," by Piers Handling. *Cinema Canada*, No 26 (March 1976), reprinted in *Take Two—A Tribute to Film in Canada*, p.206
- 11 *Canadian Film*, by David Clandfield. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.66

The Imagined City

Toward a Theory of Urbanity in Canadian Cinema

GEORGE MELNYK

Canadian cinema, like most national cinemas, has a strong sense of place. Place often carries geographic connotations—oceans, grasslands, tundra, boreal forests and mountains and the flora and fauna associated with them. Geography in turn carries seasonal identities such as snowy winters. Canadian film scholar Jim Leach calls this orientation toward place in Canadian cinema the “the nationalist-realist project.”¹ In this project it is the natural reality of Canada that is privileged as the abiding way to visualizing national identity.



Goin' Down the Road

Since the beginning of cinema in Canada images of unspoiled wilderness and unpopulated spaces have been posited by the colonizer as "Canadian" in opposition to Europe's urban historicity or America's tumultuous cityscapes. One need only reflect on the agrarian propaganda films of 1900 sponsored by the CPR or such classics of Canadiana as *Back to God's Country* (1919). Ironically, the popularity of "location" shooting of American-produced films in Canada in the latter half of the twentieth century has allowed the Canadian landscape to be used as a substitute for American landscapes with Alberta being an example of a contemporary landscape that replaces the "lost" landscapes of the American west. The much-lauded documentary tradition in Canadian film was both an outcome of this naturalism and the national-realist project and its signifier.

The literary scholar W.H. New considers the concept of the land "a verbal trope" in Canadian writing.² He writes how Canadian culture created a "language of land" and a "reading of land" as the basic ingredient of national identity in both fiction and nonfiction representation.³ This old country/new land dichotomy was a product of European exploration and conquest and of the culture that evolved from it. For example, the doyenne of contemporary Canadian literature, Margaret Atwood in her Clarendon Lectures in English Literature at Oxford University in 1991 admitted privileging "the North, or the wilderness, or snow, or bears or cannibalism...[over] the literature of urban life" in her lectures on Canadian literature.⁴ It was, she implied, much more fun to talk to the English about how their cultural fantasies of Canada had played out in its indigenous literature than to discuss urban life, which they knew so well.⁵ It was a bow to an exoticization in which the city is presented as a monolithic *anti-land* without differentiation or specificity. Concepts of identity that are grounded in the nationalist-realist project view the globalized present of cyberspaced urbanity as a uniform and anti-nationalist monoculture.

Yet we intuitively know that people visit other cities simply to experience their otherness, be it Toronto for Americans, Venice for Canadians or Mumbai for Swedes. If we lived in a universe of small city-states, like the Greeks did, rather than nation-states then the nationalist identification with distinct geographic features would evaporate and be replaced with a focus on urban difference rather than urban similarity. Curiously, the universality of first world urban experience proposed by nationalist-realist ideology allows cinematic representations of urbanity to hold within them opposites. For example, the 2006 UK film *Breaking and Entering* allows the spectator to visualize and imagine London as a distinct cultural entity while simultaneously offering the urban viewer identification with its *leitmotif* of gentrification and migration now associated with most cities in the world. As a result urbanity embraces self-referential multiplicity, while rejecting superficial categorization. London is different but its problems are similar to that of other urban centres.

The Canadian feature film, which began in earnest in the 1960s, has been a product of urban culture, economics, and sensibility.⁶ "The cinema, as commodity and art form," writes Allan Siegel, "has been inextricably linked to the cultural and economic realities of the city."⁷ Canadian cities are an important context for fictional film as a cultural/ideological influence on filmmakers' imaginations, as the normal venue for its production, and as an artistic product that speaks to the Canadian urban experience, which by the early twenty-first century embraced almost eighty percent of the population.

As a result of this demographic, the urban-cinema interface is becoming ever more central to film discourse. *Goin' Down the Road* (1970), which describes a rural-urban migration by two hapless men from the east coast to Toronto, is Canada's cinematic ur-text of urbanity. In it rural fantasies about urbanity clash with urban realities, the marginalized meet the harsh, uncaring demands of the metropolitan universe, and the migrant experiences the class-system of Canada's vertical mosaic. The film's surprising success acknowledges the importance of urbanity to the birth of narrative film in Canada, whether creatively or economically in that Toronto has as been English-Canada's media capital during the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries.

Like most cities around the world, Canadian urbanity is a diverse creature. It is highly regionalized with distinct city cultures that differ radically from one another in much the same way as an iconic painting of sun-soaked prairie fields differs from Emily Carr's hauntingly luminescent west coast forests. Yet acknowledgement of the importance of these differences is somehow seen as a threat to national identity. While cinema has nurtured a diverse urbanity of various urban geographies, its representations of the urban have been viewed as subversive of the nationalist-realist project and its unity. The geography of cities in a country as large as Canada suggests a profound diversity based on differing historical origins, ethnic makeup, and economic roles. In Canadian film one does not mistake Toronto for Winnipeg or Halifax, though American films made in Canada use these urban facades to impersonate American cities. American films can succeed in misrepresenting the real Vancouver for an imagined Seattle or a real Winnipeg for an imaginary Chicago because they seek out the generic, the clichéd, and the historically lost or demolished. Under the conditions of capitalist modernization, constant streams of immigration, and economic growth, the Canadian city has become a contingent reality that is constantly changing and which is different from one urban topography to another. The engagement of Canadian filmmakers with Canadian cities seeks to return Toronto, Vancouver or Winnipeg to the authentic identities that lie beneath their cinematic American masking. But this presents a challenge—understanding the way in which Canadian urbanity speaks through Canadian feature films.

Urban cinematic space as an expression of the garrison mentality is rooted in the historic construction of Canadian



cities as forts, which were wood versions of European walled cities or castles. Whether one is talking about 16th century Montreal or 19th century Calgary, one is dealing with nothing less than a fortress mentality as the defining origin of Canadian urbanity—of an insider versus outsider paradigm in which nature and its Aboriginal population are the quintessential Other. And so Canadian films about city life (read: the fort) tend to be more neurotic, libidinal and confrontational than films that glorify the human spirit in the great outdoors (read: outside the fort). Metaphorically, the NWMP sergeant tending a garden or building a shed is a rather unimpressive figure compared to the same sergeant on horseback silhouetted by the setting sun and surrounding by a magnificent landscape. The garrison mentality is the urban mentality that actually constructs nature as foe (wilderness) and friend (the rural) and romanticized ideal. It is the culture of the city or fort that creates a conceptualization of its interior world and its external complement. If one wants to comprehend the myriad facets of urbanity and the garrison mentality that bifurcated its world into opposites, one must look “inside” the urban mind and its internal portrayal. One must probe the garrison mentality and not the romanticized otherness of the land.⁸

Canadian space, when read as urban space rather than as wide, open natural spaces, likewise demands an interpretation which is based on the idea and role of the fort—the city walls created to overcome the threatening, impenetrable density of forests. The vertical logs of a palisade are meant to be superior to living trees in terms of usefulness. The city as man-made must be stronger than the inhuman forces that threaten it with destruction. Similarly, the nation

must be delineated and enclosed to preserve its sense of integrity, wholeness and distinctness. Canadian urban space as an *anti-land* space requires a leap into the garrison mentality, the psyche that created the land-space issue in the first place. A national self without land is almost unimaginable, and therefore a challenge to our normal way of thinking and imagining the Canadian. A national self without a stereotypical human persona is also unimaginable and likewise a challenge. And yet, it is often within urban space and urban sociology that stereotypes unravel because they originated in a non-urban environment—the fishers of the Maritimes, the farmers and ranchers of the West, the loggers of BC, etc. What distinguishes a bus driver in Vancouver from a bus driver in Halifax is a much more complicated matter.

Urban space as *anti-land* was always part of the nationalist-realist consciousness that valorized the land as an essentialist statement of identity. The land was privileged and the city was subordinated and marginalized because it was somehow derivative. By probing the cultural constructs and contradictions of the garrison mentality we begin to deconstruct the *nationalist-realist project* and replace it with the *urban-imagined project*. It is an antithetical process that contains within itself the world it seeks to subvert. This subversion of the dominant paradigm is not difficult in the postmodern era, in which the surety of singular narratives has dissolved. It is much more difficult to replace that paradigm with a new one that is located in a variety of urban spaces. In the new project of Canadian identity compilation rather than prescription is paramount. The detailed exploration of the alternative paradigm—the urban-imagined projection of Canadian identity is not simple because of “the complex ways in which film engages with the political, cultural, and mythic dimensions of national life.”⁹ This complexity is meant to flesh out the new paradigm and create an alternative coherence, in which the conflicts once hidden by rhetoric and myth, emerge in their own trajectory. The first element in that complexity is the concept of space—urban space, which in the old paradigm is posited against rural space, urban darkness versus rural light.

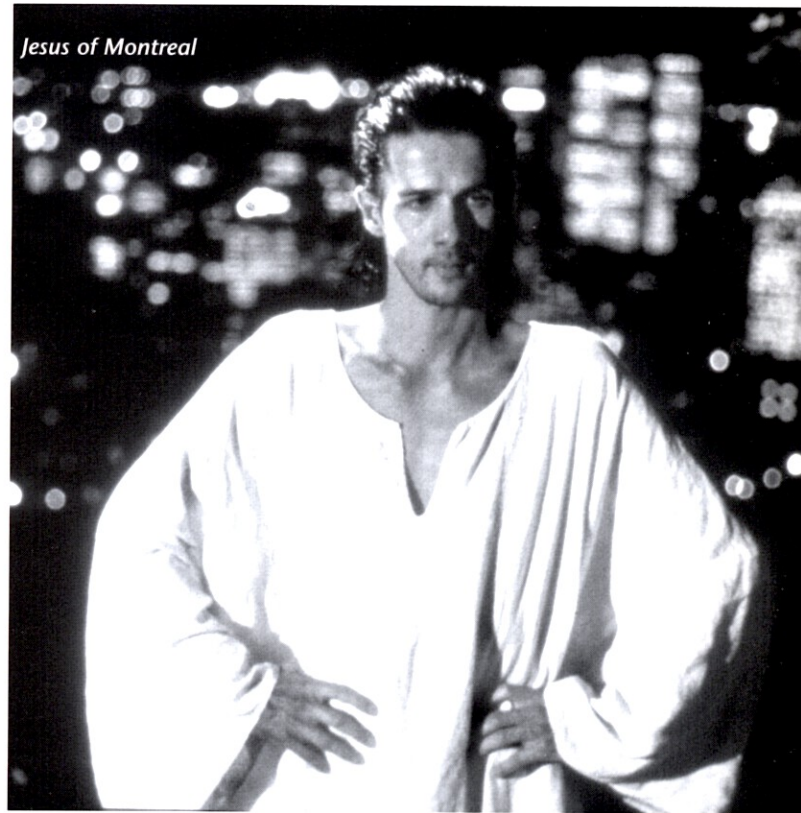
The French intellectual Henri Lefebvre identified three ways in which space is created by culture—spatial practice, representation of space, and representational spaces.¹⁰ One can view urban space as a result of the practice of physical creation, the designs and formulae that guide that practice, and the meaning or interpretation given to the inhabitants of those spaces. Monumental buildings, religious temples, commercial towers, etc. as well as the ordinary neighbourhoods where people live signify a cultural reality with numerous landmarks and pathways to meaning. The resulting *spatiality* is framed by cinematography as a scene or a view, both physically and ideologically, so that the viewer understands its meaning. The first element of urban space as *anti-land* is a *spatiality*, which is more enclosed, less panoramic, and more compact than comparable rural spaces. Perspective is short and intense rather

than far-sighted and elements of the scene are less lyrically constructed. Whenever the city space is empty of people or things the way a countryside is, the result is eeriness rather than rhapsody. Emptiness is a threat in urban space. It is urban emptiness, which is the opposite of an attractive rural emptiness, that is most to be feared and so it becomes an internalized otherness. What is magnificent in rural spaces, becomes a menacing challenge in the city. So in the binary of anti-land and land opposites reverse their readings. Spatiality is a psychological presence and reading of geography, topography or place that articulates social space.

Spatiality in turn frames *visuality* or visual perception, which constructs an understanding for the reader/viewer of fiction and film. The camera frames its images in certain ways that modify or focus the viewers' perceptions and create a certain mood or awareness for the observer. The viewer's eye is the cinematographer's eye, which carefully denotes and connotes. The camera can create a hot or cold city, a bright or dark space, an image of cleanliness or filth? Does it focus on the city as a window through which illumination comes? Or does it construct a cage-like mis-*en-scène*, where characters are trapped by a self-reflective tonality from which there is no escape? The eye is visionary and its framing of the city is based on what is envisioned in the mind of the screenwriter, the purpose of the cinematographer and the refracted memories of the spectator that sustain each moment of meaning. Overcoming the thesis of realist ideology requires narrative film to create an antithetical fictive vision of the city that resists and then overpowers the founding mythos of Canada's natural identity. This is best achieved when the filmmaker is an auteur, who speaks out of a personal experience and a personal vision of his or her city though this is not a prerequisite. Like all dialectical movements the end result is a synthesis in which the us and them of urbanity blends into a new thesis that combines the two sides of the garrison mentality (love and fear of nature with love and loathing of the fort) into a contrary standpoint in which urban darkness is transformed into light and rural lightness becomes darkened.

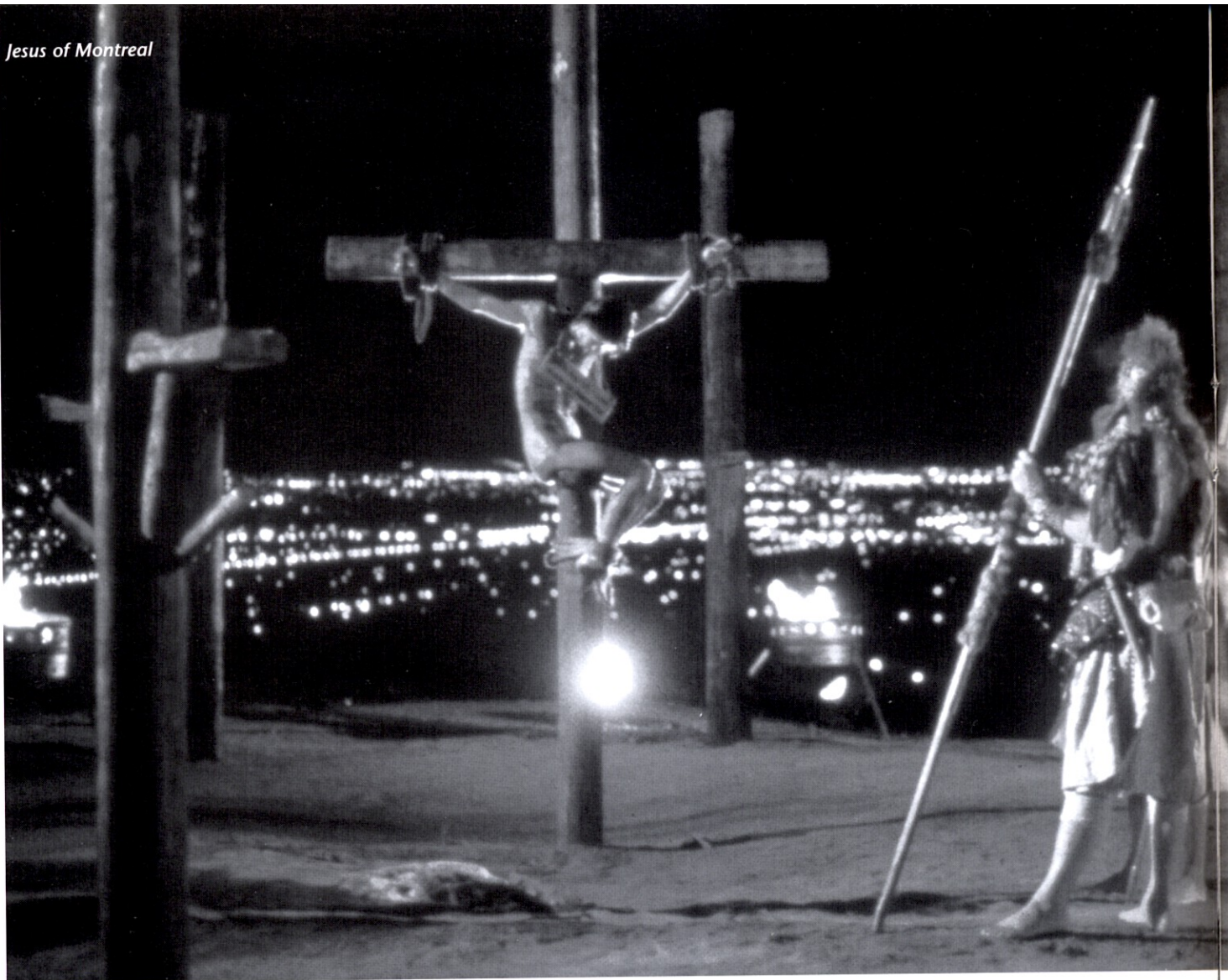
Canada's greatest thinker on *visuality*, Marshall McLuhan, while dealing primarily with the phenomenon of television and its impact on cultural discourse, gave the eye a primacy that also belongs to cinema. We go to "see" a film. We don't go to "hear" it, though orality and sound are integral to our experience of seeing a film. McLuhan's interpretation of television had an impact because television became a powerful element in culture. In contrast Canadian film has had only a minor impact on its Canadian audience in the past half-century because so few Canadians ever see Canadian films.¹¹ Canadian cinema is literally "unseen" and Canadians are "blind" to it.¹² As computer screens, the visual content of the internet and our on-going cultural experience of cyberspace integrates television and film into an increasingly unified, portable, visual dimension, the stand-alone cinematic experience as a theatrical moment also migrates into the private home with its large

Jesus of Montreal



screen projection.¹³ As a result the *spatiality* and *visuality* of cinema become transformed. While films continue to be constructed in general for the classical theatrical experience, increasingly large audiences for cinema are viewing films outside theatres—in planes, portable DVD players, television and computer screens. McLuhan's "the medium is the message" applies to the consumption of film in all its evolving forms. As the technological context changes, a conflict appears within cinema because of its historic roots and practices. Its specific space and the large screen visual power come under the influence of everything from video games to digital effects. The new media reconstruct the message that is cinema. In turn cinema reconstructs the contemporary city within the increasingly hegemonic parameters of cyberspace.

While *spatiality* and *visuality* orient narrative cinema toward a configuration dominated by visual art, narrative film's representation of the city is equally grounded in *orality*. *Visuality* and *orality*, in turn, are linked by the device of music. Just as *visuality* enhances *spatiality* and *visuality* is enhanced by oral dialogue so musical sound enhances the others. Placing dialogue and music together within *orality* or *parole* results in a third fundamental element in urbanity. It is another framing. While the documentary mode traditionally used single-sourced rhetoric as an authoritative voice-over to guide the viewer, narrative films depend on a multiplicity of voices to create the ethos of the story. This multiplicity can be linked to the diversity of urban voices themselves. Taking Siegel's "multi-faceted city that represents...a diversity of cultural, historical, and geographical markers,"¹⁴ as an baseline, it may be said that urban cinema represents the diverse multiculturalism of Canadian



urban existences in the linguistic and musical polyphony that is its social space. How Canadian feature films use speech from and about urbanity is just as crucial to understanding Canadian cinema as are the creations of spaces and visual markers. The screenplays that originate with Canadian film directors are stories that are rooted in their urban experiences, whether they be minor or major. They speak out of and for the auteur's sublimated imagination. This imagination, in turn, is an urban-based imagination where class, race, gender and ethnicity mix visually and orally.

When Canadian film speaks out of its urban roots, it does so in a marginalized way because it is not a mass medium in its own country. This lack of audience encourages a kind of distillation of vision that reinforces Canadian cinema's cultural marginalization. The visual signifiers that Canadian films carry can be read by a Canadian audience as essential to their own sense of site or they can be read as an anti-site because of that audience's Hollywoodization. Hence, that same audience can view the marginalized purity of Canadian cinematic imagery as strange, bizarre and incomprehensible or as profoundly expressive of a national self. This contradictory or oppositional reading

makes Canadian cinema's construction of space, visuality, and orality problematic. This is especially true in the case of urbano-centric cinema, where the ideological baggage of identity is imported from the nationalist-realist-naturalist project. Curiously, the very displacement of urban cinema to the art house margins gives it an edge, a tension, an expressive anxiety that comes from its supposed non-centrality. Imagery and dialogue that seems "untrue" by an audience may not be a creative failure. Rather it may be a profoundly cultural one. The integration of indigenous urban space, vision and sound in an auteur film by a Canadian director about Canada may portray a universe that Canadians live in and even recognize, but which few associate with the cinematic experience.

Urbanity itself must be considered a wholistic term that refers to the totality of urban culture. Since urban ways of life are primarily human ways of being, the various dimensions of that urban whole can come from various disciplines dealing with human life. First, one can speak most obviously of the physicality or *architecture* of urban space, which varies from city to city. Second, urbanity refers to the *biology* of urban environments. Every city is an evolving, living organism and the way in which a filmmaker captures that



organic aspect of urbanity (parks, lawns, natural sites) is a fundamental determinant of its urban specificity. Third, urbanity involves a general mood or ethos that can be ascribed to a specific city—its emotive personality or *psychology*. Fourth, it involves the *philosophy* or idea of the city, a theoretical construct that is meant to explain and encapsulate the meaning of the city. This meaning can coalesce into a single metaphor or fundamental text about the characteristics of a city. For example, urbanity can be associated with alienation or social conflict as its determining factor.¹⁵ Fifth, urbanity deals with the *economics* or work life of a city and its diverse commerce, manufacturing, transportation and service industries. Sixth, urbanity deals with the *technology* embodied in urban life and how it affects humans. Seventh, there is the ethnic diversity of urban life, which creates the *sociological* dramas of the city. Eighth, there is the *history* of each city, its beginnings and its temporal evolution. Balancing this sense of history, is a

ninth feature of urbanity, which carries within itself a speculative vision for a city's future—a dream of becoming and transformation, often called “progress.” These nine factors enhance the three structural elements of cinema-space, vision and sound.

A counter-narrative to this Habermasian categorization of urbanity can be found in other thinkers about the city. Anton C. Zijderfeld in his *A Theory of Urbanity* (1998) claims that every city has an organized rational side (bus system) and a “demonic, non-rational nature” (crime).¹⁶ While these two sides can be made to fit the schema I described above, they are more effective on their own. Zijderfeld reserves the term urbanity for those cities that have a distinct cultural energy with which its inhabitants identify, implying that there are cities without urbanity, i.e. they lack social cohesion, collective pride and political power that mould an identity.¹⁷ In short there is no distinctive civic identity in these cities. Zijderfeld also responds to the postmodernist view that digital technology and communication have “rendered the world borderless” and the idea of the city and urbanity as “meaningless”¹⁸ because of cyber hegemony. While rejecting the emphasis on non-physicality, Zijderfeld acknowledges that the “virtual reality of cyberspace compels us to rethink space, including urban space.”¹⁹ The interpretation of urban life and cityscapes certainly changes in the twenty-first century but its architecture, psychology, sociology, economics etc. remain elements even as they are transformed. Unless the interpretative, unifying power of urban identity exists in a city, Zijderfeld argues, urban life ends up as “a meaningless and abstract order.”²⁰ Filmmakers are some of the people who create these fundamental interpretations, these singular metaphors by which cities are known. It is filmmakers, among other artists, who sense the “solidarity, worldview, and ethos” that constitute the urbanity of a particular city and then articulate it in their own way.²¹ These filmmakers do not create a single urbanity. Instead they create multiple variations of the theme of a single city, depending on their experience and standpoint. So even while Canadian cities differ from each other in dramatic ways, films about any single Canadian city also differ radically from each other because no city is a single entity. It is awash with ideas of itself that are multiples constantly at play with one another as communities, classes, genders and cultures occupy different spaces and envision different placing within a single metropolitan area.

What is a city in the eyes of a filmmaker? How does a city influence the films of a filmmaker? How does it become a palpable presence in a film? How does a filmmaker get in touch with the élan of a city—its vital spirit? These questions, no matter how tentatively they may be answered, open the door to rethinking the land versus city dichotomy and moving the concept of national identity beyond the paradigm of “the land.” R. Bruce Elder in his groundbreaking philosophical work on Canadian film and culture, *Image and Identity* (1989) criticized the search for the “distinctiveness of Canadian culture” because of the negative impact this has on understanding the deeper elements of human identity and its artistic expression.²² The urban self is one of those deeper elements, which has been imagined by filmmakers but which has not been measured against the rural markers and myths of the imaginary Canadian.

In their introduction to *Downtown Canada: Writing Canadian Cities* (2005) Douglas Ivison and Justin D. Edwards point out that urbanity “has often been elided from our public discourse, our national mythologies, and critical discussions...” especially in regard to literature.²³ The same is true for film, but unlike contemporary literature, which is central to critical discussion of national culture(s), the marginalization of contem-



porary Canadian cinema when added to this urban marginalization, only adds to the difficulty of assessing the contribution of its insights into Canadian urban life. "This privileging of the wilderness and nordicity," the editors write, "as defining characteristics of Canadian identity not only fails to recognize the lived experiences of the vast majority of Canadians, but also distances Canadian readers from their literature."²⁴ This distancing is compounded for the medium of cinema by the marginality of indigenous film in Canadian consciousness. Films about city space and life deal with factors disquieting to the rural myth—issues of cosmopolitanism, materialism, sexual, racial and cultural diversity, radicalism and liberalism, transgressiveness, suburban dysfunction, economic dominance, and global political influences. But the rural myth has been ingested so strongly into the urban psyche that it has created within itself a kind of self-alienation. The urban myth does not trust itself. First, because it is in a state of flux brought on by rapid historical change, while the land and the rural other seem unchanging, which is historically false. Second, because it has feelings of inferiority about its in relationship to the rural myth it cannot quite conceive of itself as dominant in national discourse. Third, because of self-doubts about its credibility as an alternative narrative the imagined-urban project rejects any kind of ideological mission. It rejects the old narrative and its project as clichéd, but it has little faith in the validity of its own. The Canadian city as an outgrowth of the fort meant to protect it from external demons finds itself a demonized entity—first as a wilderness within to be distrusted according to the old narrative and second as a diffuse world that cannot be held together in a meaningful way.

An urban interpretation of Canadian identity allows the

creation of a post-national space or spaces in which "discourses are transnational."²⁵ What this means is that the national question is subordinated to a discussion dealing with issues that either come from elsewhere or are about multiple places and spaces. This inherently postmodernist globalization may be readily identifiable with a city like Toronto and its powerful immigrant demographic, but does it also apply to Winnipeg? It does in so far as Winnipeg participates in the transformative experience of migration and sociological change and technological change. But we need to be careful not to let sociology become the defining approach to urbanity. Discourses may be transnational in all Canadian urban spaces in the 21st century but in different ways. The splintering of identity that this implies does not weaken the claims of urbanity to validity as an alternative "national" identity. It enhances its formative role in imagining the national self in new ways. That imagining is a synthesis of two movements—the earlier rejection/glorification of land in an oppositional binary created by the settler society in search of national identity and the resolution of that binary with a postmodern embracing of rurality and wilderness as a mythic construct rather than a pure naturalist reality. Urbanity raises the bar on the myth of the land by focusing on its contradiction between its symbolic/rhetorical value and its real role in the political economy. Urbanity gains its historic dominance over the myth of the land, not by airbrushing it out of existence and replacing it with the city, but by surrounding the countryside with its own consciousness, by revealing the urban sources of the rural myth—by making the land in its own image.

One way to understand both the unity and diversity inherent in Canadian urbanity is the concept of the "urban body", a metaphoric embodiment of a city in which space,

visuality and sound come together in a metaphysical statement about the city as whole.

In Denys Arcand's masterpiece, *Jesus of Montreal*, the vaulted ceilings of the city's basilica are mirrored in the tomb-like spaces of the Métro. The urban body is the body of the dead Christ. The basilica (heaven) and the subway (hell) are unified into a single reality through the portrayal of space (emptiness), visuality (enclosing walls), and sound (the music that fills the spaces). Both places end up being the same space. When a subway is presented as the equivalent of a basilica then the urban body becomes a single sculpture. Similarly, the urban body in Guy Maddin's *Saddest Music in the World* is presented as an interior space, an arena in which we perform to wile away the time as an endless winter besieges us or as the "heart" of the continental body, where both physicality and spirituality play out their games. The auteur directors that create these imagined bodies are both subjective observers (self-watchers) and objective carriers (projecting dreamers) of their specific urban cultures, whose cinematic embodiments keep moving toward a unified vision of who and what they are. The auteur imagination, which narrates out of the filmmaker's specific urbanity, provides the keys to urban cinema, where territoriality and desire clash and are remade.

Only by walking through their visionary creations will the journey result in a concluding understanding of how urbanity in cinema is capable of replacing the *nationalist-realist* myth with something equally substantial, i.e. equally coherent and credible. One should not, however, be misled into thinking that a city captured in a variety of ways by a variety of filmmakers results in some sort of unified totality—a new Canadianism that is as unitary as the nationalist-realist ideology. The parts do not create a sum total. Unity resides in each film and not in a pastiche of them. Each city may be one, but it is always has different as each person who lives in it. Because of this there can be no single qualitative understanding of Canadian urbanity as there was of Canadian nationalism. Nor can the imaginaries of cinematic urbanity serve to give Canadian nationalism a new face. As a contribution to a postnationalist and transnationalist discourse, urbanity in Canadian cinema replicates the posture of city-states and not the angst of the nation-state.

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Notes

- 1 Jim Leach, *Film in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2006) 12.
- 2 W.H. New, *LandSliding: Imagining Space, Presence, and Power in Canadian Writing* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997) p.5.

- 3 Ibid, p.10.
- 4 Margaret Atwood, *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) p.5
- 5 Ibid. She explains: "I said I thought the English had quite a lot of urban life themselves, and that they didn't need to hear about it from me." The implication being that all urban life is similar and non-distinctive.
- 6 Clearly, the creators of documentary film, whether based in the National Film Board, or private concerns were most often urban-based filmmakers. However, the myth has grown up that their captured the "essence" of Canadian identity in dealing with the land and its people. If someone was up to doing a quantitative analysis of the vast body of documentary films made by the NFB between 1940 and 2000, it would be insightful to do an urban/land computation, as well as a qualitative study of content, which would source the myth and test its validity. The feature film differs from the documentary in that it is an imaginative positing of identity formed by a cultural environment, which ends up having deeper psychological and sociological dimensions because its treatment of the real is less limited ideologically. For example, *Mon Oncle Antoine* (1970), an NFB-produced feature film, far surpasses even a great lyrical documentary such as *Pour la suite du monde* (1962) in explaining the culture of Quebec.
- 7 Allan Siegel, "After the Sixties: Changing Paradigms in the Representation of Urban Space" in Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice, eds. *Screening the City* (London: Verso, 2003) 144.
- 8 In contrast to this Europeanized consciousness, pre-urban aboriginal understanding is integrative, positing one universe in which animate and inanimate life are equally related. There is no garrison mentality among First Nations cultures, at least in pre-reserve times.
- 9 Leach, *Film in Canada*, 2.
- 10 See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*
- 11 In the 1990s the figure for English Canada averaged 1 per cent and 5 per cent for Quebec. In the 2000s Quebec began to increase its attendance to 20%, while English Canada's stagnated.
- 12 While English-Canadian audiences for Canadian films hover in the 1 to 2% range, Quebec audiences in the first five years of this century reached up to 25% of audiences.
- 13 Siegel in "After the Sixties" talks about the multiplicity of cinema spaces in contemporary society. 144.
- 14 Ibid, 143.
- 15 See Claude S. Fischer, "The Public and Private Worlds of City Life" in *American Sociological Review*, Vol 46 (June, 1981) 306-316 for one approach to characterizing urbanity and Joseph L. Blau, "A Philosophical View of the City" in *American Quarterly*, Vol 9, No. 4 (Winter, 1957) 454-458 for another.
- 16 Anton C. Zijderfeld, *A Theory of Urbanity: The Economic and Civic Culture of Cities* (New Brunswick N.J. Transaction Publishers, 1998).
- 17 Zijderfeld, *A Theory of Urbanity*, 73.
- 18 Ibid, 125.
- 19 Ibid, 128.
- 20 Ibid, 139.
- 21 Ibid, 141.
- 22 R. Bruce Elder, *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture* (Waterloo, On. Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1989) pp.11-14 incl.
- 23 Justin D. Edwards and Douglas Ivison, eds. *Downtown Canada: Writing Canadian Cities* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005) p.6.
- 24 Ibid. p.7
- 25 John Clement Ball, "Duelling and Dwelling in Toronto and London: Transnational Urbanism in Catherine Bush's *The Rules of Engagement*" in Edwards and Ivison eds., *Downtown Canada*, 192.

I'm just a simple filmmaker

An Interview With Michel Brault

AYSEGUL KOC

In close-up, his head is tilted towards her. Hers is slightly tilted, too. He is looking at her. She is looking down. This frame, extracted from the rest of the twenty-three that make up a cinematic instance, is on the cover of a book in my hands, featuring the delicate beauty of Geneviève Bujold and Claude Gauthier caressing a strand of her hair in the snow. The book is a gift from Michel Brault given to me in a hotel suite where I conducted the following interview during the Toronto International Film Festival. The beautiful black and white image is unmistakably his own, from *Entre la mer et l'eau douce* (1967). Published by TIFF Group in 2007, André Loiselle's *Cinema as History: Michel Brault and Modern Quebec* explores the intricate embroidery of Michel Brault's filmmaking interwoven with Quebec's history. Loiselle rightly claims that to follow the career of Michel Brault as a director and cinematographer is to follow the history of modern Quebec. Sitting across from me, in the subdued light of a September afternoon, is the man behind some of the most unforgettable images I have seen in cinema, as director, *Les ordres* (1974), *Pour la suite du monde* (1963), *l'Acadie, l'Acadie* (1971) and as director of photography, *Mon oncle Antoine* (Claude Jutra, 1971), *À tout prendre* (Claude Jutra, 1961), *Les Bons Débarras* (Francis Mankiewicz, 1980), *Mourir à tue-tête* (Anne Claire Poirier, 1979), *Chronique d'un été* (Jean Rouch, Edgar Morin, 1961).

Aysegul Koc: I find the cinema of Quebec somehow patriarchal. Of course we see filmmakers like Anne Claire Poirier, Léa Pool, Louise Archambault but that is rare, whereas there seems to be a succession of male filmmakers, often with camaraderie amongst them or a father to son relationship between them.

Michel Brault: I don't think so. Maybe it is because I could be considered one of those fathers (laughs). Cinematically I don't know if I have sons, it takes a couple of generations to say how that pattern works. It hasn't been that long that Quebec cinema exists. No, I don't believe so, Aysegul. (He gives a perfect rendition of my name, although he has just met me for the first time).



Pour la suite du monde

AK: How would you explain the scarcity of women?

MB: You find that there aren't many women in Quebecois cinema?

AK: Yes.

MB: I am not the person to ask, perhaps. I see much fewer films than before. I have not kept track of recent developments, new filmmakers. But just a little while ago I saw a beautiful film by Anaïs Barbeau. There is Catherine Martin. Do you know her? She has made many films. (Silence) Then, there is the mother of cinema Quebecois, perhaps Anne Claire Poirier? I should think so.

AK: Where do you see the cinema of Quebec in the contemporary cinema of the world?

MB: The cinema that we made in the 60s, when our cinema began to be really dynamic has in itself its tradition. You were saying that Quebec's cinema is patriarchal but let's say a director like Alanis Obomsawin makes her films with filmmakers who were in that tradition. All my life, when I was younger, my friends and I would watch all the good films we could get in the world. We'd even go to New York to see a film. But today it is impossible to follow the incredible flow of films made all around the globe. Our cinema of course suffers from that as well. I don't work in the industry anymore so it is hard to tell from the perspective of a filmmaker working now.

AK: What about your production company, Nanouk Films?

MB: No, not anymore. The company takes care of the films that I made already, but that is all. I am a little too old. I cannot work all day anymore. One has to be very alert when making a film.

AK: How long has it been, that you quit filmmaking?

MB: Slowly, I can say in the last three years. I've just made a film on poetry, three films of one minute each actually, that make part of an ensemble. By the way, there were women filmmakers involved.

AK: Do you think that the work conditions have changed a lot since you started making films with Pierre Perrault and Claude Jutra?

MB: Yes, and everything has become easier with little cameras like the one you're holding now. It is easier technically but one can say that it paralyses the filmmakers. For us, those incomplete, hard to carry around, noisy, -we could not record synch sound in the beginning - cameras were stimulating. Yours, we do not hear, but no film is rolling in it, right? (Smiles)

AK: The technology has changed but so have the work conditions. You had the kind of liberties, in terms of time and creative space that many cannot think of having now. It seems the most important question in getting films made now is how to finance them.

MB: That is a pity. Well, Telefilm Canada for example gives more importance to commercial success than creativity. When we were making films in the 60s and 70s, there was no financial constraint whatsoever, no one was interested if a film we were making would turn out a commercial success or not. But not only that, our films weren't on TV, on CBC/Radio Canada in the beginning, we were not making films with broadcasting in our minds, nor were they interested in showing our films. But then, eventually, Radio Canada aired all

the Quebecois films. I think NFB is in the process of dissolving, but until now it has managed to make films that are free from commercial attachments.

AK: Can we really say that?

MB: For NFB? Yes, I think so. It makes me mad when you go to Telefilm with a documentary project and they ask for a dramatic structure, writing and writing... to justify that your film will pay off. In a sense it is understandable because it is public money. Still I find it difficult to think of making a documentary with a dramatic structure. It shouldn't be that way.

AK: You have worked both in fiction and documentary. What is the difference?

MB: I worked in fiction or documentary when the occasion presented itself. For example during the



October affair, all of a sudden I heard that there were people imprisoned. I did not know even how many, no one knew. Then I heard there were ones who came out. I took a recorder to interview the people who came out. At the end of fifty hours of interviews without a camera, I had a painstaking material in my hands. I was one of the first to discover this. I told myself "I cannot keep this in my drawer I need to do something, it is a national pain and a national responsibility not only for Quebec but for Canada". The first idea was to make a documentary but the events had passed already. For me, it takes events to make a documentary. Something that happens, unfolds, be it someone fishing or someone put in prison, I must be there when the event takes place. We see many documentaries today where people talk talk talk, a little editing and it becomes a documentary. For me in an ideal documentary there shouldn't be interviews. There should be talking, one talks to the other but it must be live, take place in life. I was the caretaker of those painful interviews with which I could not make a documentary, even if I wanted to, the army was

there to stop us from filming. So by necessity, I took all those interviews and I turned them into a kind of script. And I made a *mise en scène*, a reconstruction that feeds from my experience in documentary but not a documentary itself, *Les ordres* (1974). If another subject comes up that can be a documentary, it gets made as a documentary. As a cinematographer, if a series of fiction work comes my way, I make fiction.

AK: And sometimes you make a crossover between the two.

MB: Yes.

AK: You have worked with master filmmakers such as Jean Rouch, Claude Jutra, Pierre Perrault...

MB: Jutra and Perrault are very different. Jutra is everything to me. He is the one who showed me all even if he was younger than me. We were born in cinema together, so to speak. We worked together, learned together. *Pierrot des bois* (Jutra, 1956), *À tout prendre* (Jutra, 1961)...Perrault was



a scenarist. His name is in the credits as maker of *Pour la suite du monde* (Perrault, Brault 1962) because he was very important in building a relation with the people of Ile aux Coudres. Pierre is a man of words, I am a man of images, gestures, and I like making a sequence where people don't talk, not necessarily always, but well, from time to time. We made two films together, *Pour la suite du monde* and *l'Acadie l'Acadie*.

AK: That I find fascinating.

MB: Have you seen *Éloge du chiac* (Brault, 1969)?

AK: No.

MB: It is a film that came out of *l'Acadie l'Acadie*: the kids of Moncton discuss with their instructor the difficulty of speaking in French. It has come to be very influential in Acadia. Chiac is French mixed with lots of English words that Acadians speak.

AK: Your work makes part of social change in Quebec. Do you think it is still possible to do so in cinema?

MB: I should think so. It is not just social change that interested me, but rather historical change. When we take the *October Affair*, for *Les ordres* (Brault, 1974) can we say it is social change? It was more like a government exercising power on people at a given time.

AK: But the film has an effect, it imprints itself as a work of art, gives it presence, affects what people think, what follows...

MB: Yes, you're right.

AK: To even show how people live, I am thinking about documentaries like *Les raquetteurs* (Gilles Groulx, Brault 1958), *La lutte* (1961), or fiction like *Mon oncle Antoine* has a great influence in identity formation. In your case, as a filmmaker, your presence was crucial to capture moments that otherwise would have been lost. Can we still see this kind of an influence of cinema? I am asking this because I fear it is no longer the case.

MB: Let's take for example, very good documentaries made recently: *Roger Toupin l'épicier variété* (2003) by Benoît Pilon or *À force des rêves* (2006) of Serge Giguère. They don't fit the pattern you talk about.

AK: Yes, they are very good films but still I feel the times have changed. There is, as you said, a multitude of films.

MB: I think it is up to you to analyze that. I am not good at talking about implications of social change. I'm just a simple filmmaker who's been lucky to live at the right time, I had the right mindset to go through these years of explosion of the techniques and apply these techniques to films.

AK: You worked both as a director and a cinematographer, what's the difference?

MB: It is more comfortable to do cinematography or camera than directing. Let's say as a director of fiction, you

need to create life, you need to manage the team who would realize your vision and it is not easy. When you arrive at the set all eyes are wide open looking at you, waiting. "Well, what are we gonna do? You got a good idea? Where are we gonna put the camera?" All must work well to succeed. It is agonizing. Being a director of photography, after all those years, is very easy. Getting nice images, experimenting with photography is agreeable. Physically it is hard all day on set but there is no anguish there, whereas from the moment one dreams of making a film as a director, anguish starts.

AK: I often ask myself why people only remember the name of the director of a film and not, let's say, the cinematographer. Most probably what we see on screen is not the vision of the director solely.

MB: I think you're right but I would think that between the scriptwriter and the director. The others who work in the film are complimentary. Without a script, a director –we speak of fiction– can do nothing. If the script is well written, what the director can mess up is the way the actors are directed or sequencing. A film with a good script, with good dialogue works. I can't think of a film with good dialogue that misses the point.

We in Quebec started as *auteurs* of our work, professional scriptwriting did not develop in Quebec, very little perhaps. In the States or France we know of scriptwriters. Jean Claude Carrière or say script doctors in the states...the circumstances required us to be the authors of our films. Denys Arcand, for example, doesn't make films of other people's scripts.

AK: What you say between the scriptwriter and the director, I find between the cinematographer and the director. Sometimes I suspect that the author of the film is more the cinematographer than the director.

MB: The cinematographer is not responsible for everything. Except in some cases... I know some cases where the cinematographer is the author of the film but the director has dealt with the producer, he has a bigger salary... so you are not going to change that. I know some directors who don't know how to make a film. Strange that you ask this question... You are very keen to spot that there could be a problem there. I know the daughter of a famous director in France and my former assistant François Protat was her director of photography. I was in Paris and I passed by the set and François said "You cannot imagine, Michel, it is hell. She asked me to make a close up from head to toe." I went to see the film when it came to Montreal, it is a very good film, with her name on it.

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From Big Snow to Big Sadness

The Repatriation of Canadian Cultural Identity in the Films of Guy Maddin

JOHN SEMLEY

Much has been made of the dwarfing of Canadian cultural heritage and identity by the neighbouring behemoth that is the United States. This anxiety proves especially true when one considers the canon of Canadian cinema, where early Yankee-produced Yukon adventure films and Bombardier-endorsed corporate propaganda were answered in the wake of the Second World War with the reactionary and largely compensatory slew of government-subsidized documentaries which constitute what Jim Leach refers to as Canada's "national-realist project."¹ With the ostensible exception of Quebecois cinema, which has benefited greatly from both the unique cinematic sensibilities of francophone filmmakers such as Jean Pierre Lefebvre or Denys Arcand, and the eager responsiveness of Quebec's embedded francophone audience, it appears as if Canadian cinema has largely failed to produce a filmmaker who can singularly articulate the national experience in a way that approaches the mammoth cultural resonance of American counterparts of the John Ford or Robert Altman variety. And while the talents of Arcand, Cronenberg and Egoyan have

My Winnipeg



certainly drawn the eye of world cinema upon Canada (however fleetingly), these filmmakers have failed to speak to issues of Canadian identity with the same level of intellect and necessary absurdity as Winnipeg auteur Guy Maddin.

Here, I will examine how issues of national and local identity are portrayed in the work Canadian writer/director/cinematographer/editor Guy Maddin. First, I will analyze the historical misconstruction of Canadian identity on film at the hands of Hollywood, drawing largely from Pierre Berton's *Hollywood's Canada: The Americanization of Our National Image*. Next, through a discussion of the relation between the filmmaker and the cinematic city which serves as his base of operations, I will situate Maddin within the Canadian national filmic project as specifically a Winnipeg filmmaker and articulate exactly what differentiates the sensibility of a Winnipeg filmmaker from the rest of Canada's larger cinematic body. Finally, I will speak to Maddin's position as the preeminent contemporary Canadian auteur and chief mythmaker. In doing so, I will make the claim that Maddin, through his highly allusive style and idiosyncratic approach to Canadiana, is a filmmaker who has not only reimagined Canada's national history but that of cinema itself in the interest of repatriating Canada's dominion over not just its own national cinematic narratives, but its national and cultural identity more generally.

America's Northern Frontier: Yankee Images of Canada

In *Hollywood's Canada*, an analysis of half a century of American² films about Canada, historian Pierre Berton provides an exhaustive account of the phenomenon which he calls the "Americanization" of Canada's national image. "So powerful," writes Berton, "was the Hollywood image of Canada that in many cases it was accepted as the real thing—even by Canadians."³ His unease is rooted not exclusively in the concern that the image of Canada, both nationally and abroad, has been cinematically commandeered and consequentially compromised by the United States. For while Berton is apt in noting the importance of "the earnest and often brilliant documentaries of the National Film Board"⁴ to the Canadian cinematic project, he stresses the value of a more representative portrait of Canada in commercial movies: being those which popular audiences are regularly responsive to. How this consistent cinematic misrepresentation of Canada has transpired historically is often, not surprisingly, in accordance with the classical tenets of American mythologizing.

The traditional image of Canada, propagated as frequently on our own souvenir t-shirts as in the films Berton dissects, is one of unsullied wilderness, big snow, sex-crazed *courier des bois* and implausibly moralizing Mounties. Many of the films detailed in *Hollywood's Canada* depict Canada as being the same sort of unspoiled frontier (depicted most commonly in the sweeping vistas of the American Western) that had collapsed in the United States following the proliferation of the modern metropolis and the resulting shift to

urbanity. In the face of such harrowing developments, Canada assumed prevalence in the American cultural consciousness as being, as described by a title card in Frank R. Strayer's *The Lure of the Wild* (1925), a faraway land that is "safe from the evils of civilization."⁵ In the early days of Canadian cinema, the still budding Hollywood system worked diligently to transpose typically American fictions of the Old West onto Canada's geographical landscape. As Berton notes,

Hard-riding posses, men in cowboy outfits, necktie parties, covered wagons, painted Injuns, boot hills, vigilantes, and even tin stars were moved across the border with scarcely a change in the plot except for the presence of movie Mounties who, all too often, acted like American town marshals.⁶

So, with the Canadian landscape being employed as little more than a stupefying substitute for the untarnished American frontier, the Canadian moviegoer had no popular cinema to call his own and, perhaps more fatally, no corroborating national mythology. (And though the merit of such a mythology is certainly open to scrutiny, such value judgments cannot be applied a canon devoid of content.) The picture of Canada which was promulgated by Hollywood, then, was more a projection of American values and mythologies onto Canadian soil than an accurate representation of life north of the 49th parallel. Indeed, this silly, predigested national image was one which amounted to "no real image of Canada at all, except that of a geographical absurdity – a vast, empty, snowswept land of mountains and pine trees."⁷ It is against this backdrop of "geographical absurdity" that Canada's most acute, eccentric and important mythmaking auteur would emerge, albeit far from the mammoth topographical peculiarities of the Rockies, the saltwater beaches of the Maritimes or the vast picturesque valleys of Acadia.

Winnipeg as Geographic Wasteland/ Creative Wellspring

Marked by brutally cold winters, a near uncanny topographical uniformity and a permeating sense of isolation from the rest of the nation, Manitoba and its capital, Winnipeg, stand as perhaps Canada's most aberrant geographical and cultural oddities. "Without an ocean, a line of mountains, or an official second language to mark its specificity," University of Manitoba professor Brenda Austin-Smith writes, "the province does not really register in the cultural imaginary of the country."⁸ Others, like Winnipeg filmmaker and former member of the Winnipeg Film Group Shereen Jerrett, are less merciful. "Winnipeg's a real hole," Jerrett bemoans "and most Winnipeggers have an incredible insecurity complex about being from Winnipeg."⁹ While I am certainly unqualified (albeit not uninterested) in identifying exactly how this endemic psychosis of inadequacy has fueled Winnipeg's immensely creative and prolific

filmmaking movement, I am comfortable vouching for the invaluable role that the unique position of Winnipeg has played in the development of Maddin's comparably unique cinematic output.

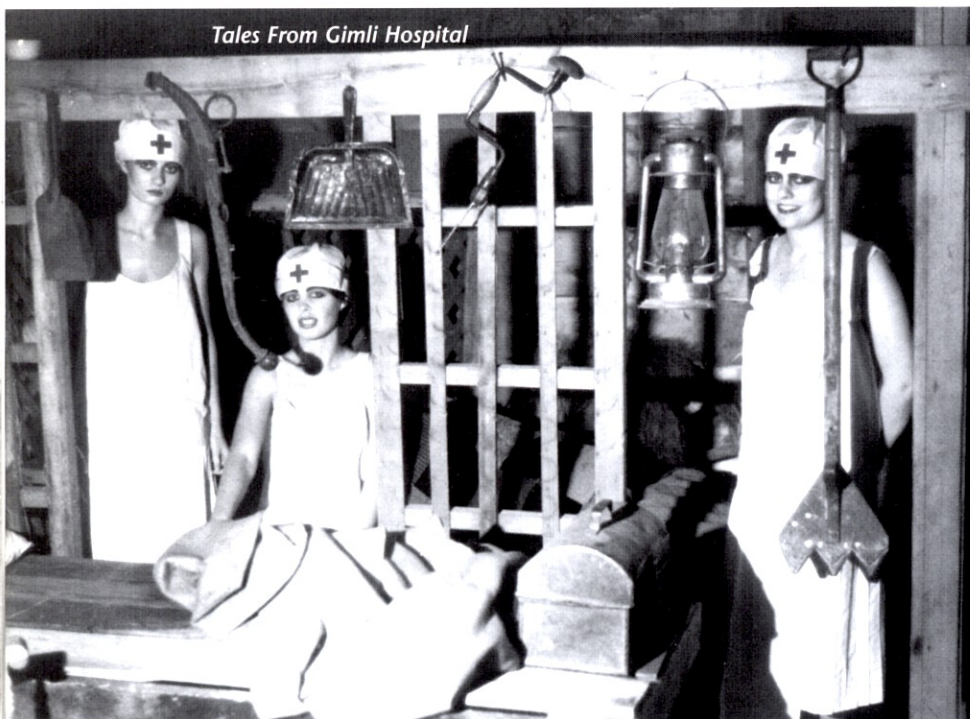
It is precisely the status of Winnipeg as Canada's "isolated anonymous city complete with its own sense of remote confinement"¹⁰ that allows it to exist unregulated as a sort of cinematic *carte blanche*. Free from the fetters of the delicate politics of Quebecois cinema or the dynamic multicultural narratives of typically Torontonians films,

Maddin's often twisted version of Winnipeg is permitted to exist without formal predecessor and thus free from the burden of expectation. Perhaps the result of the inbred insecurity Jerrett mentions is a desire to act out against the antecedent history of Canadian cinema—or at the very least to forget, like so many of the amnesiacs in Maddin's films, that it has transpired at all. Certainly, Maddin himself seems not at all interested in the traditions of Canadian cinema. Apart from a short dealing with the profusion of outdated hairstyles in Winnipeg (1989's *BBB*) and his latest attempt at mind's-eye factual revisionism, *My Winnipeg*, he has shown no interest in our national documentary tradition. Further, Maddin's work draws formal influence more from Soviet montage and German expressionism than *cinéma-vérité*, and thus largely eschews the traditional Canadian allegiances to realism or direct cinema.

This rejection of practices which have continually, though by no means officially or exclusively, typified Canadian filmmaking uniquely situates Maddin within the strata of Canadian cinema as a filmmaker whose vision remains consistently distinctive and fresh (which is especially impressive considering his constant allusions to primitive film forms). While Maddin's films may be described rather accurately as "bizarre reworkings of old genres"¹¹ or, more disparagingly, as being marked by "artifice and affectation"¹² it remains undeniable that they possess both a style and sensibility that stands as the representative quintessence of the Winnipeg Film Group's varied radical eccentricities.

It is a sensibility that, according to Geoff Pevere, "speak[s] more closely to an experience shared by Canadians, which is the experience of living in Canada but spending your whole life watching cultural products from other countries... the strangeness of the films is a strangeness that we all share."¹³ In the face of such invasive cultural imperialism (the United States being the most flagrant offender), Maddin makes no attempt to reaffirm his personal and national identity by making weepy Maritime period pieces (see: pretty much every original show ever broadcast on the CBC) or astute socio-historical commentary (see: Don Shebib's *Goin' Down the Road*). Rather, he ignores—or perhaps more accurately, especially considering the strong psychosexual subtext of much of his work—he represses the feelings of

Tales From Gimli Hospital



Careful



inadequacy fostered both by the shadow cast on us by our neighbour to the South and by the established psychological regionalism associated with Winnipeg.

A topic which frequently emerges in discussions of Maddin's uniquely defined cinematic sensibility is the sheer frigidity of the Manitoban climate. In the Canadian pop culture encyclopedia *Mondo Canuck*, Geoff Pevere and Greig Dymond cite "the wickedness of Winnipeg winters as likely reason why the city has proven so fertile for postmodern pastiche: since it was so cold so often, people learned themselves inside."¹⁴ Claims of such a coldness often surface in regards to Canadian cinema. Catherine Russell, for example, notes that the effectual "coldness" of Egoyan's *Exotica* "is not unrelated to the Canadian, climate, which forces people into enclosed spaces for many months of the year."¹⁵ Indeed, it was amidst this characteristically Canadian seasonal flight to the interior that the first Winnipeg film co-op was conceived. As Maddin's early rival John Paizs points out in Noam Gonicks' 1997 documentary *Waiting For Twilight*, the two would often spend entire weekends cooped up indoors at friend and film professor Steve Snyder's house, voraciously consuming endless hours of videotape and 16mm projections and often arguing through the night about style and film history.¹⁶ But while Maddin's films may largely present grimly inhospitable climates—from the wintry Russia of *Archangel* to the avalanche-prone Alps of *Careful* through to the snow-buried Winnipeg of *The Saddest Music in the World*—the films themselves exude a narrative and stylistic vivacity which transcends such climatologic frigidity.

Reimagining Canada: Maddin as Mythmaker

It is from Winnipeg's distinctive, isolated mentality that Guy Maddin has surfaced as not only the figurative head of the Winnipeg Film Group (having surely deposed John Paizs) but as a contemporary icon of Canada's larger cinematic mentality. Maddin's importance to the larger Canadian cinematic project is rooted not merely in his proficiency or idiosyncrasy, but in his ability to retroactively mythologize Canada. Beginning with his first feature, *Tales From the Gimli Hospital* (1988), Maddin's films have expressively reimagined Canadian history and culture through the creation of absurd mythologies. Rooted in the tendency of Icelandic Manitobans to be, as Maddin puts it, "humourlessly obsessed with their own history,"¹⁷ *Tales* is the preposterous fable of Einar and Gunnar, two rivaling Nordic-Canadians both vying for the affection of the lovely (and quite literally lifeless) Snjófridur against the backdrop of a "Gimli we never knew."¹⁸ As silly as it is disturbing, the folklore of Einar and Gunnar is related in the film to two young children (and consequentially, the viewer) by the grandmotherly Amma as a sort of local "tall tale" of the Paul Bunyan or Johnny Appleseed variety. Unlike the fairly benign (and boring) American folklore it evokes, however, Maddin's yarn is rife with murder, necrophilia and bizarre rituals—which range from the usage of fish intestines for

hair styling to buttock-grabbing duels, all of which constitute what Will Straw calls the "bogus ethnography"¹⁹ of this diminutive Manitoban town.

The fantastic local mythology Maddin stages in *Tales* occurs not merely at the narrative level (the story itself is fairly baffling upon first viewing), but more prominently in terms of style. Drawing liberally from German expressionist cinema of the early-20th century (the use of shadows is heavily reminiscent of films such as *Nosferatu* or *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*), silent-era film and Felliniesque flights of



Guy Maddin

fancy, Maddin flouts his "obsessively precise (if fragmented and eccentric)"²⁰ knowledge of film history in order to revisit various occulted cinematic traditions and claim them in the name of Canada. Maddin as cinematic nationalist rewrites the history of cinema: a history which, as Berton notes, Canada remained largely excluded from. Through his shameless appropriation of mostly negligible and eclectic preexisting film forms—as Straw notes, "[t]he Icelandic saga, the Soviet montage film, and the Bavarian mountain melodrama are all almost as minor as Canadian film itself"²¹—Maddin imagines a place for Canada within the history of cinema; a place which exists esthetically somewhere near the intersection of Vertov, Fritz Lang and *Eraserhead*-era David Lynch.²²

Maddin's brand of cinematic revisionism extends further than Gimli, however, well into the snow-swept Alpine village of Tolzbad in *Careful* (1992). The ever-precarious topography in *Careful* (residents of Tolzbad communicate in hushed whispers and animals have their vocal cords removed so as to prevent avalanches) seems to reinvent the notoriously flat landscape of Winnipeg. In fact, the highest peak in Winnipeg is a man-made hill created by "layering sod over a garbage dump"²³ and Maddin's description of this geographical anomaly as "a magical, enchanted place, where a tobogganing child might be cleft in two by a car bumper or washing machine that has somehow uprooted itself halfway down the slope"²⁴ seems to directly inform



Saddest Music in the World

his curiously-Canadian retelling of the German mountain film. Further, in 2003's *The Saddest Music in the World*—a film which emerged from Maddin's self-avowed obsession “with the idea of mythologizing Winnipeg”²⁵—a depression-era Winnipeg is depicted as being quite literally drowned in snow (so much so the streetcars are entered submarine-style, through a chute in the roof) and thus suggests the waist-high gypsum snow which, according to Pierre Berton's reckoning, marks Canada's early Americanized cinematic (mis)representations.²⁶ In effect, the absurd geographical and climatologic anachronisms of *Careful* or *Saddest Music* seem to reverse-engineer America's dominant sway over Canadian culture by whimsically revealing in the sheer unfounded incorrectness of Hollywood's cinematic assumptions.

In terms of directly addressing the bastardization of the Canadian image by American interests, *The Saddest Music in the World* is Maddin's (and perhaps Canada's) most valuable cinematic text. The narrative details a contest hosted by paraplegic beer baroness Lady Port-Huntly (Isabella Rossellini) in which participants from around the globe converge on Winnipeg (which is proudly extolled as “the saddest city in the world”) to perform the most morose music from their respective nations. The ulterior motive to Lady Port-Huntly's contest involves her extortion of the nation's

abundance of alcohol to propagate an image of Canada as “that happy suds body to the North”; an image which she can consequentially exploit by flooding the United States with her own Muskrat Beer following the then-foreseeable fall of prohibition. In doing so, Lady Port-Huntly is effectively marketing the beer-guzzling caricatured image of Canada (an image visible contemporarily *par excellence* in, for example, Molson's famously denigrating “I.Am.Canadian.” commercials) and thus cheapening Canada's internationally exportable image for her own profit. Though her motives may be disingenuous, Lady Port-Huntly nonetheless inverts the usual American imperialist paradigm, giving Canada the final word on issues of North American economic and cultural imperialism.

The Saddest Music in the World also speaks more overtly to the Americanization of Canada's national identity. The Canadian-born representative of America in Lady Port-Huntly's musical contest, Chester Kent (Mark McKinney) embodies the very artifice and vapid “razzle dazzle” which marks much of American entertainment. Chester himself brazenly concedes that American culture is “vulgar and obvious, full of gimmicks” and his stage productions are designed to calculatingly evoke feelings of sorrow from the audience. Unlike his father and representative of Canada in the competition, who humiliatingly but sincerely howls

"Red Maple Leafs" while wearing his sullied Canadian Lieutenant's uniform from the Great War, Chester's performances engineer sentiment in lieu of expressing it genuinely. (Of course, the audience is wowed by these lavishly-produced but emotionally hollow musical numbers.) Chester is so wholly inculcated in the vacuous American amalgamation of art and commerce that he relinquishes his Canadian identity without demur and, as if he has stepped out of Pierre Berton's worst nightmare, stands as the logical outcome of the whole historical drama of American cultural imperialism in Canada. So, as Mark Peranson notes, "*Saddest Music* can be seen as the most pointed statement to date on American cultural imperialism, made in the country that has suffered from it the most."²⁷ And though the relative star-power of the film and its fairly widespread critical acclaim may make it Maddin's most broad, accessible movie to date (excluding, perhaps, 1997's *Twilight of the Ice Nymphs*), its explicit condemnation of America's systemically imperialistic culture apparatus and its more understated and urgent plea for a self-sufficiently constituted Canadian cultural identity also make it his most significant.

Concluding Remarks

From the bark fish cutting of *Tales From the Gimli Hospital* to the swimming pools of beer in *The Saddest Music in the World*, it is clear that Guy Maddin possesses a unique, if at times twisted, view of Canadian culture. While generally unconcerned with Mounties, towering pine trees, direct-cinema and other such standardized tropes of the nation's larger cinematic project, Maddin's films nevertheless reveal themselves as having "permeating if indirect things to say about Canada, allegorically or otherwise."²⁸ Like Berton, it seems as if Maddin patently recognizes the function of cinema in constructing a sense of nationhood. In the conclusion to *Hollywood's Canada*, Berton writes that it is "simply not true that there is no such thing as a distinctive Canadian identity...we do differ in some very major ways and in many significant minor ways from our neighbours. I don't want to pretend that our way is necessarily better, just that it is different."²⁹

With a visual and narrative style that unabashedly rejects the conventions of the classical Hollywood storytelling and a cinematic sensibility that is inimitably evokes his hometown of Winnipeg, Maddin stands as the most distinct embodiment of this cultural difference. His preoccupation with deconstructing the Americanized image of Canada has resulted in his creation of a re-imagined national cinematic folklore which, however absurd or fantastic, is nonetheless inarguably distinguishing. While Canada may indeed lack "the kind of home-grown mythology that only a Hollywood or a Tin Pan Alley can really provide,"³⁰ Guy Maddin opens up the possibility for a new kind of Canadian identity: one fashioned cinematically which, unlike the work of more "export only" Canuck auteurs like Arcand or Egoyan, speaks more effectively to the distinctive and often strange experience of being Canadian.

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Notes

- 1 Jim Leach, *Film in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2006), 12.
- 2 For the sake brevity, as well as consistency with Berton's text, I am using "American" here to refer to the United States of America. This of course raises many issues of American cultural imperialism, most of which rest beyond the desired scope of my inquiry in this paper.
- 3 Pierre Berton, *Hollywood's Canada: The Americanization of Our National Image* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1975), 153.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 12.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 55.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 205.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 230.
- 8 Brenda Austin-Smith, "Strange Frontiers: Twenty Years of Manitoba Feature Film", in *Self Portraits: The Cinemas of Canada since Telefilm*, eds. Andre Loiselle and Tom McSorley (Ottawa: The Canadian Film Institute, 2006), 237.
- 9 *Prairie Post-Modern: Tales From the Winnipeg Film Group*, prod. and dir. Paul McGrath, CBC: *The Journal*, July 4th, 1991.
- 10 Gilles Herbert quoted in Austin-Smith, 240.
- 11 Leach, 84.
- 12 Adam Hart, "The Private Guy Maddin", *Senses of Cinema* (2004), unpag. (online edition).
- 13 *Prairie Post-Modern: Tales From the Winnipeg Film Group*, prod. and dir. Paul McGrath, CBC: *The Journal*, July 4th, 1991.
- 14 Geoff Pevere and Greig Dymond, *Mondo Canuck: A Canadian Pop Culture Odyssey* (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., 1996), 133.
- 15 Catherine Russell, "Role Playing and the White Male Imaginary in Atom Egoyan's *Exotica*", in *Canada's Best Features: Critical Essays on 15 Canadian Films*, ed. Gene Walz (New York: Rodopi, 2002), 322.
- 16 *Waiting For Twilight*, prod. and dir. Noam Gonick, 60 min., Kino Video, 2004, DVD.
- 17 Caelum Vatnsdal, *Kino Delirium: The Films of Guy Maddin* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring, 2000), 45.
- 18 Will Straw, "Reinhabiting Lost Languages: Guy Maddin's *Careful*", in *Canada's Best Features: Critical Essays on 15 Canadian Films*, ed. Gene Walz (New York: Rodopi, 2002), 306.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Vatnsdal, 10.
- 21 Straw, 312.
- 22 Comparisons between Maddin and Lynch are frequent: see Jim Hoberman, "The Children of David Lynch," *Premiere* (February 1991); Vatnsdal, 43; Pevere and Dymond, 41.
- 23 Vatnsdal, 73.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 *Teardrops in the Snow: The Making of the Saddest Music in the World*, dirs. Matt Holm & Caelum Vatnsdal, 22 min., MGM, 2003, DVD.
- 26 Berton, 56.
- 27 Mark Peranson, "Northern Exposure: Winnipeg's avant-garde auteur Guy Maddin comes in from the cold," *City Pages Vol. 25 Issue 1209* (2004): unpag. (online edition)
- 28 Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Essential Cinema: On the Necessity of Film Canons* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2004) 191.
- 29 Berton, 230.
- 30 *Ibid.*

Being at Home with Roy Dupuis and Pascale Bussières

or, Star-Gazing In and Out of Québec

PETER DICKINSON

Let me state at the outset that I see this essay participating, very modestly, in a (queer) film studies tradition that takes seriously fan culture and the notion that star images circulate among and are productively engaged with by audiences as ideological texts of self-stylization and collective identification. As such, I wish to point out that the immediate impetus for the following reflections was this particular fan's immense pleasure in learning of the double best acting wins by Roy Dupuis and Pascale Bussières at the 2005 Genie and Jutra Awards (for *Mémoires affectives* and *Ma vie en cinémascope*, respectively). Not only did this happy coincidence present an opportunity to reflect critically on the parallel twenty-year careers of two bona fide Québec film stars—and my own identification with them as such—it also allowed me a quasi-scholarly platform from which to hazard a few critical speculations about the nature of Québec celebrity culture more generally.

If we accept, following from Richard Dyer and others (see especially the work of Jackie Stacey),¹ that film stars can be read semiotically as clusters of signs that intersect with and communicate to spectators at given historical moments larger ideas and meanings about gender, race, sexuality, nationality, and the like; and if we agree, moreover, that the phenomenon of celebrity that underpins the star system is in some fundamental way compensatory, speaking to various anxieties and/or voids in an individual's or a collective's social and psychic life, then how do we interpret the various television and film roles of Dupuis and Bussières, as well as the equally various audience identifications they provoke? How, in turn, do those roles and identifications necessarily comment on the cultural/national nexus at the heart of the Québec entertainment industry's surprisingly successful battle against a North American media universe saturated with American content? And how, finally, do those roles and identifications signify differently nationally and internationally?

For, unlike many of their Québec acting contemporaries, Dupuis's and Bussières's recognizability as stars transcends the hothouse environment of the province's local media culture. This has to do, on the one hand, with the success-

ful exporting and showcasing of their talent to the English-speaking world via Bussières's high-profile roles in films by English-Canadian auteurs Patricia Rozema, Guy Maddin, and Jeremy Podeswa, and via Dupuis's long-running stint as Michael on the popular syndicated television series *Nikita*. But, as I will conclude by arguing, each actor's international appeal owes as much to their status as "queer" film icons, an aspect of their star personae that was arguably established at the very outset of their respective careers, and then solidified with Dupuis's role as the gay hustler Yves in Jean Beaudin's *Being at Home with Claude* and Bussières's as the newly liberated Camille in Rozema's *When Night Is Falling*—films which both enjoyed great popularity on the international film festival circuit. This, then, is the "system" behind my own star analysis in this essay: I begin first with a general discussion of celebrity media in Québec, before moving on to comment briefly on the particular "medium" of transmission (i.e. television vs. film) of Dupuis's and Bussières's evolving star images. Next, I offer a few observations about genre, focusing on the role played by the costume drama and the biopic in solidifying each star as both a movie celebrity and a national icon. And, finally, I conclude with some remarks on gender and sexuality as they relate to theories of (queer) spectatorship and transnational audience identification.

Media

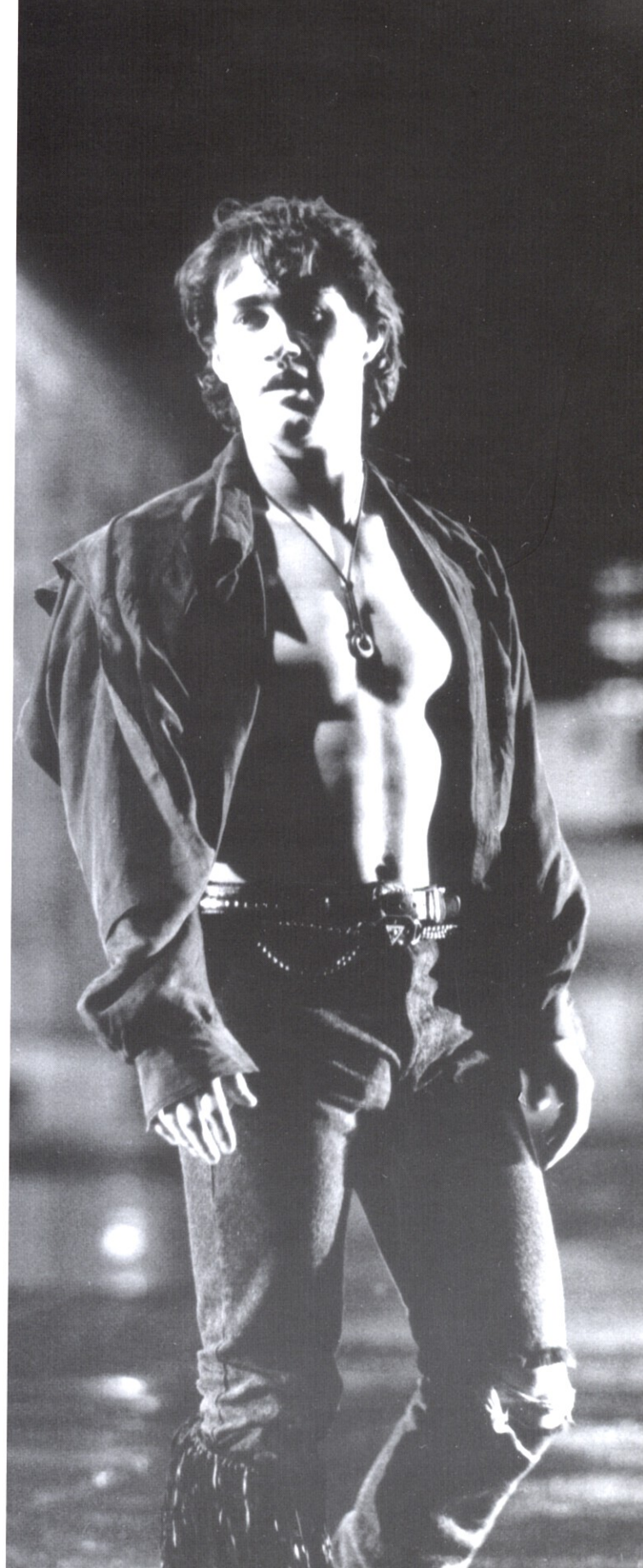
In addition to having a more robust film industry than its English-Canadian counterpart, Québec's star system operates at a more fevered pitch, fueled by television talk shows like *Toute le monde en parle* (which attracts audiences of close to one million every Sunday evening when it airs on Radio-Canada), and by celebrity gossip magazines like *Échos vedettes*, *7 Jours*, and *Star Système* (all owned by Pierre Péladeau fils's Québecor Inc.), upon which readers spend more than \$3 million a month.² Québecor also owns the gossipy newspaper tabloids *Le journal de Montréal* and *Le journal de Québec*; a chain of music stores (at which *lancements* of new discs by the latest pop stars occur almost daily); the television network TVA (upon which Julie Snyder

established the standard for the outrageous celebrity interview on *Le Poing J*, which aired from 1997-2000); the largest cable and internet provider service in Québec, Vidéotron; and a film distribution company, TVA Films. But media concentration and convergence is only part of the story here. Entertainment journalism and celebrity gossip in Québec practically invented the concept of embedded reporting. Interviews with stars are authorized by publicists and producers in carefully managed and controlled situations that offer lots of Hollywood glitz but little substance or depth, and are more about promotion and general boosterism than serious news coverage.

Thus, for example, Dupuis, who is notoriously media-shy, tolerates a series of embarrassingly intimate and cloying questions from reporter Michel Beauduin in the November 30, 2002 issue of *7 Jours*—on everything from his status as a sex symbol, his approach to women, whether or not he wants children, and what “power” accrues to him as a star (for the record, Dupuis states that he always tries to act according to his conscience)—in exchange for the following plug of his upcoming movie, *Séraphin*, at the end of the article: “The man has charisma. He had it before, but now it’s more fully realized....Go watch this movie in order to experience the freedom that Roy Dupuis inspires.”³ And for his at that time unprecedented second appearance on *Tout le monde en parle* in October 2005 to promote, alongside screenwriter Ken Scott, his new film *Maurice Richard*, Dupuis gamely sang along with the audience to Pierre Letourneau’s popular 1999 song about The Rocket, put up with host Guy Lepage and sidekick Dany Turcotte’s bad jokes, and participated in a Maurice Richard trivia contest with Scott. His reward? Getting a chance to plug, in front of a million or more fans, his Rivers Foundation, for which he currently serves as co-president, and which helps protect the rivers of Canada from exploitation by hydro-electric developments.

Modeled on the French program of the same name hosted by Thierry Ardisson (who was himself a guest of the Québec show in September 2006), *Tout le monde en parle* has, since its premiere in 2004, become a staple of Québec’s celebrity diet, and an unavoidable stop for media, entertainment, sports, and political personalities of all persuasions. Bussi res was invited on following her Jutra win for *Ma vie* in February 2005, where she politely answered Lepage’s somewhat leading questions about what it was like to work with a director as notoriously difficult as Denise Filiatrault, and to play a living legend who was now trying to muscle in on the acclaim for her own performance. And in March 2007, Andr  Boisclair became only the second person, after Dupuis, to be invited back to the show. On his first visit, in September 2005, when he was then campaigning for the PQ leadership, he flirted so outrageously with Turcotte, according to *Globe and Mail* columnist Konrad Yakabuski, that he effectively outed him. For his return visit, on March 4, 2007, Boisclair was doing damage control, explaining away recent media reports about the PQ’s slide

Being at Home with Claude



in election polls, and responding to a shock-radio host's comment to another gay candidate about the PQ becoming "a club of fags."⁴ I mention this to suggest that questions of gender and sexuality, especially as they overlap with questions of nationalism, are never far from the surface in discussions of Québec celebrity culture. If, as more than one observer has noted, the Québec show business industry functions more as a big family, then like the aspirant nation for which it serves as a metonym, it's a family that has its share of (sexual) dysfunction. One need look no further, in this regard, than the fallout surrounding the 2004 criminal conviction of the man who for all intents and purposes invented Québec's star system, Guy Cloutier, jailed for sexually assaulting child star Nathalie Simard while she was his client and protégé during the 1970s and early 1980s.⁵

Medium

The popularity of *Tout le monde en parle* points to the fact that it is the medium of television, even more than the cinema, through which Québécois invest collectively in the representation and reproduction of a national-cultural

imaginary, and—as importantly—in the homegrown stars who bring to life that imaginary on the small screen. There is an abundance of statistical evidence showing that whereas Québécois have no qualms about shelling out \$12 or more to see dubbed Hollywood blockbusters, since the 1950s, and beginning especially with the broadcast of the first *téléroman*, *La Famille Plouffe*, on Radio-Canada in 1953, they have consistently shunned dubbed American television shows in favour of locally produced French-language ones.⁶ Shows are made quickly and relatively cheaply, drawing on a deep pool of writing, directing, and acting talent, and are broadcast across the province at the same time each week, creating a sense of "eventness" that contributes to a swelling of audience numbers. Stars who ignore this kind of exposure, or who dismiss the medium as lowbrow, do so at their own peril, and it is no accident that Dupuis and Bussi res have regularly taken on television roles throughout their careers, nor that their respective performances in the hugely popular linked series, *Les Filles de Caleb* and *Blanche*, in the early 1990s in effect made those careers.

The recent success of the talk-show and sitcom (cf. the extraordinarily popular *La petite vie*) formats notwithstanding, the television dramatic serial, or *t  l  roman*, continues to hold a special place in the history of Qu  bec popular culture. Thus it was that Dupuis was plucked from relative obscurity in 1990 and cast in *Les Filles de Caleb* as Ovila Pronovost, the intense and brooding love interest of the show's willful protagonist, Emilie Bourdeleau. At that time the highest-rated series in Qu  bec television history, *Les Filles* instantly cemented Dupuis's celebrity status, not least for the way in which, as Bill Marshall has noted, his role as Ovila, the often shirtless and sexually objectified woodsman who works hard and loves even harder, consciously traded on various natural and "naturalized" codes of masculine and national authenticity.⁷ Two years later, Bussi res achieved her own star-making breakthrough when she was cast as Ovila and Emilie's daughter, Blanche, in the equally popular sequel to *Les Filles*. The series mimicked the successful sex/gender formula of its predecessor, focusing on an independent working woman in 1916 Abitibi, whose career as a nurse and relationship with her best friend (Pascale Montpetit's Marie-Louise) is thrown into turmoil by an *amour fou* with Patrice L'  cuyer's Clovis. Both Dupuis and Bussi res have since gone on to star in several other Qu  bec-made television series and mini-series—including *Scoop*, *Marguerite Volant*, *Le dernier chapitre*, and *Le coeur a ses raisons*—but it was arguably *Les Filles* and *Blanche* that established their star images both within and without Qu  bec. For the films they were cast in immediately following—and presumably as a result of—these television roles were Jean Beaudin's *Being at Home with Claude* and Charles Binam  s's *Eldorado*. Both edgy and sexy takes on contemporary Montreal's demimondes of sex and drugs, in which Dupuis and Bussi res were very much playing against period type, the films premiered to great acclaim at Cannes and made a significant impression in English Canada as well.



Shake Hands With the Devil

Genre

With the success of *Les Filles* and *Blanche* we also see how genre becomes crucially implicated in the structure of address mediating the reception of Dupuis and Bussi res as film and television stars in Qu bec. In terms of what Marcia Landy has identified as the "cinematic uses of the past,"⁸ the heritage film, or historical costume drama, also holds a special resonance within the Qu b cois national-cultural imaginary, its "transtemporality," in the words of Marshall, that is, the doubled backward and forward movement of its narrative time and the time of its narration, establishing at once a nice myth of origins and the historical continuity of a core connection to place that underscores that myth.⁹ In other words, we look at Dupuis in buckskin or beaver pelts, and Bussi res in cloche or corset, and we are invited to identify with them not just as movie stars, but as *gens de souche*. Is it any wonder, then, that they, along with countless other Qu bec film stars, have continued to don period dress throughout their careers?

As important in terms of illustrating how film genres participate in transtemporal relays between past and present,

performer and role, on-screen spectacle and off-screen historical reality, is the biopic. And it is, I think, no accident that Bussi res and Dupuis have recently solidified their celebrity status in Qu bec via their respective star turns as Alys Robi and Maurice Richard, portraying national icons whose professional successes and personal struggles we're clearly meant to read as mirroring Qu bec's collective throwing off of decades of national, religious, and gendered repression in the years immediately preceding the Quiet Revolution. (Dupuis's recent star turn as Rom o Dallaire, commander of United Nations forces in Rwanda at the time of the 1994 genocide, in Roger Spottiswoode's *Shake Hands with the Devil* [2007], arguably serves a similar function for Qu b cois audiences split over Canada's current combat role in Afghanistan.) Hollywood biopics of late have largely become exercises in actorly mimicry (one thinks of the rival Capote films, for example), and while Bussi res and Dupuis successfully avoid this trap in their performances, the publicity machines surrounding each film have certainly traded on a certain identificatory slippage in Qu bec audiences' connections to the various star



When Night is Falling



personae overlapping each film, a signifying chain that we might map palimpsestically, or along a continuum, as performer-role-historical subject-national/cultural icon. In the case of Bussi res, normally known for her withdrawn and emotionally distant film roles, this meant playing up her wonderfully exuberant and extroverted incarnation of the still very much alive Robi, featuring the two performers together at events surrounding the film, noting repeatedly that she sang all the Robi songs featured in the film, and emphasizing the physical resemblance between the two performers. In the case of Dupuis, the filmmakers were no doubt counting on the audience's de facto identification with him in the role. For Binam 's film is the third time Dupuis has played The Rocket on screen, having previously starred in Jean-Claude Lord's 1999 television mini-series, as well as a classic 1997 Heritage minute about the hockey icon.

Gender

When Alys Robi was released from the mental asylum in 1952 following several rounds of electro-shock therapy and an involuntary lobotomy, it was the gay community in Qu bec City that first embraced her and welcomed her back to the stage as she slowly attempted to reestablish her career. A residual effect of Bussi res's performance in *Ma vie*, then, is, arguably, its consolidation of her status as a queer film icon, something that had of course begun, espe-

cially in English Canada, with her appearance as Camille in Patricia Rozema's *When Night is Falling* a decade earlier. Indeed, in turning to examine how Bussi res and Dupuis signify transnationally as film stars in the final section of this essay, I want to emphasize that understanding the ways in which gender and sexual address overwrite national iconicity in the spectatorial production of each actor as (ex)portable object of desire becomes key to reading their most high-profile English-language roles, with an erotic heat in the case of Dupuis, and an equally erotic cool in the case of Bussi res, providing audiences with a reassuring fix on their respective representations of classic masculinity and femininity.

That these and other roles of Bussi res and Dupuis are likewise available for queer consumption and resignification has much to do with the fact that each famously starred (and got naked) in films in the 1990s that were absorbed into the New Queer Cinema pantheon even as their resolutely Qu b cois and Upper Canadian plots—not to mention technical accomplishment—resisted the dominant politics and aesthetics of that cinema. The spectacular success of *Being at Home with Claude* and *When Night is Falling* on the international film festival circuit, including the international queer film festival circuit, combined with Dupuis's and Bussi res's career willingness to tackle other queer-inflected roles, necessarily adds another identificatory layer to their star images. In the case of Dupuis, queer audience identification is in part transmitted through the intense physicality and superabundant eroticism he brings to all his performances, from his first film role as the tortured kid from the sticks in love with his best friend in Michel Langlois's *Sortie 234* (1988), through to the wayward son, Alex, who disrupts everyone's (male and female) emotional and sexual equilibrium in Langlois's *Cap Tourmente* (1992), and the bankrupt straight architect Dominique who pretends to be a gay antiques dealer in order to rescue his business in Claude Fournier's lamentable *J'en Suis* (1997). With reference to this latter film, Tom Waugh summarizes the dilemma for (queer) fans of Dupuis as follows: "Can the star who read his scripts too lazily be forgiven when the hate movie of the decade includes his to-die-for wrestling scene [with co-star Patrick Huard] followed by a long and lingering bare-all shower scene?"¹⁰ Even the lack of affect and actorly restraint Dupuis displayed in the four years he played counter-terrorist operative Michael Samuelle in the wildly popular television series *La Femme Nikita* (it was syndicated in over 50 countries and has produced a thriving afterlife on the internet) has been read—at least to judge by the voluminous fan fiction (both straight and gay) devoted to the character—as an erotic tease, Dupuis's clipped and cryptic performance barely disguising the animality lurking under the surface of Michael's black suits and uber-professional fa ade. With Bussi res, on the other hand, it's the twin poles of obsession and repression we see mixing in her roles as Camille in *When Night is Falling* and Louise in *La R p tition*, among others, that account for their performa-



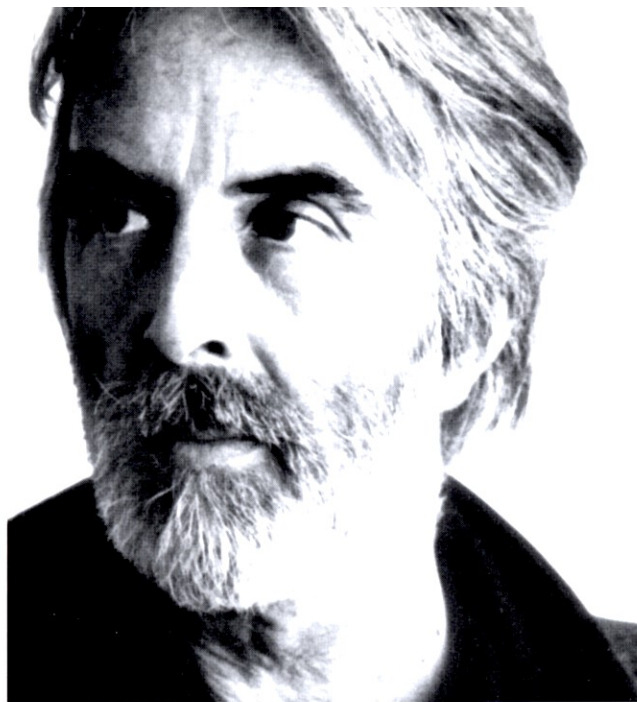
tive doubleness. This, in turn, encourages us to re-read all of the portraits of female friendship on offer in her films in terms of their queer representational resonances—however ambiguous, paradoxical, or problematic those resonances might be (as, for example, in the case of the two films Bussi res has made with Micheline Lanct t, *Sonatine* [1983], and the Bergmanesque *Deux Actrices* [1993]).

Of course, queer spectatorship has always been a process of seeing double, of looking both at and beyond the image bounded by the screen. In tracing the remarkably parallel contributions of Dupuis and Bussi res to what Judith Mayne has called the “cinematic public sphere,”¹¹ and how those contributions have intersected with different film-going communities, I have attempted to demonstrate that reading the semiotics of their stardom requires a similarly doubled gaze. This means paying attention not just to how their performances are received inside and outside of Qu bec, but also to how both dominant and minority audience identifications are further inflected by questions of gender and genre, medium and message, the national and the sexual.

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Notes

- 1 See Richard Dyer, *Stars*, new edition (London: British Film Institute, 1997); and Jackie Stacey, *Star-Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
- 2 Val Ross, “The Doyenne of the Mag Trade,” *Globe and Mail* 23 February 2006: R3.
- 3 Michel Beauduin, “Entrevue avec Roy Dupuis,” 7 Jours 30 November 2002: 37; my translation.
- 4 Konrad Yakabuski, “Boisclair finding homosexuality may be an issue after all,” *Globe and Mail* 3 March 2007: A11.
- 5 See Patricia Bailey, “Circling the wagons around Qu bec’s star-driven culture,” *Globe and Mail* 15 April 2006: R7.
- 6 See V ronique Nguyen-Duy, “Du t l roman de cuisine au supermarch  m diatique: L’ volution du t l roman qu b cois depuis 1980,” *Qu bec Studies* 18 (1994): 45-62; and Gisele Tchoungui, “The Qu bec *T l roman*: Between the Latino and the Wasp, a TV Serial with Gallic Humor in North America,” *Qu bec Studies* 25 (1998): 3-22.
- 7 Bill Marshall, “Gender, Narrative and National Identity in *Les Filles de Caleb*,” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 2.2-3 (1993): 51-65.
- 8 Marcia Landy, *Cinematic Uses of the Past* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996).
- 9 Marshall, 55.
- 10 Thomas Waugh, *The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s UP, 2006), 407.
- 11 See Judith Mayne, *Private Novels, Public Films* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988).



Michael Haneke

Beyond Compromise

ROBIN WOOD

Prior to his masterpiece, *Code Inconnu*, Michael Haneke made five films as writer/director, one adaptation, and wrote one screenplay realized by another filmmaker. *The Castle*, though a thoroughly accomplished film in its own right, is the least interesting: an intelligent and faithful film version of Kafka's novel. Its importance in relation to the more personal films lies in the link Haneke presumably wished to make between his own work and Kafka's—at which point I should say clearly that I find Haneke's work the more interesting and productive, the more directly relevant to the quandaries we all face today: Kafka's novels induce a sense of hopelessness, Haneke's films (although profoundly pessimistic) continue to demand change, if change is still possible. What connects the two artists is a sense of a terrible, perhaps unreachable, hence undefeatable power that ultimately hangs over our lives, controls and destroys us. Those unsympathetic to Haneke (and they are many, especially since *Funny Games*) might link his work to Kafka's under the general label of 'paranoia'. But there is a crucial difference: in Kafka the higher power remains mysterious, inexplicable; in Haneke it is subjected to scrutiny and analysis, unmasked, named. Kafka is paranoid; Haneke is realistic.

The screenplay (realized by Paulus Manker) is another matter: *The Moor's Head* relates very closely to Haneke's concerns but is an altogether cruder, uglier, more simplified statement of them. It's possible (I don't know) that the screenplay was an earlier work, preceding his own films; or it's possible that Manker simplified and coarsened Haneke's

vision. It differs from his own films in a number of ways: 1. It contains 'in your face' physical horror (making it, at climactic moments, almost unwatchable); 2. It places a major burden of responsibility on the protagonist's wife (insensitive, incapable of understanding her husband's obsessions), whereas women in Haneke's films are shown to be at worst uneasily complicit (*The Seventh Continent*), and otherwise (*Benny's Video*) capable of beginning to extricate themselves from the dominant male discourse; 3. Its analysis of our predicament (if we really want to save the human race, or the planet, and defy Freud's universal death wish) is altogether too simple: ecology, although obviously of enormous importance, is not the only issue involved. Rather, the later films suggest that (as Jane Fonda asserts at the end of the Godard/Gorin *Tout Va Bien*) we must 'Change everything. But how? Everywhere, now.' Haneke, today, seems less optimistic about the possibility of this happening (but then so, today, does Godard).

The five films that Haneke has directed from his own screenplays fall neatly into two groups: the two multi-narrative films (*71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance*, *Code Inconnu*) and the three single-narrative films (*The Seventh Continent*, *Benny's Video*, *Funny Games*). This article is concerned with the second group (the only three films I have available on video for repeated viewings), but I want to preface it by making the obvious connections. Chance (unpredictable encounters, people happening to be in the same place at the same time) plays a major role in the two

multi-narrative works, no more than a minor one in the other group (in *Funny Games* it is virtually eliminated by the film's dominant character, who not only dominates the others but controls the film itself), but it is not the films' inner concern. Rather, the two films examine (one might say mercilessly scrutinize) people's reactions and their effects: the consequences of the chances, the coincidences, would have been different if those involved had reacted differently: accidents happen, yes, but what counts is how you respond, how you deal with them, the words you speak, the gestures you make. Beyond this is the films' omnipresent awareness of the pressures of modern living that partially, perhaps predominantly, determine one's behavioural choices. Haneke seems to me at once among the cinema's sternest yet most compassionate moralists: the films steer a precarious course between blaming the individual and blaming the culture, between seeing the individual as capable of choice and seeing him/her as merely a helpless victim of 'the system' (which is always the system of advanced corporate capitalism in all its dehumanizing horror). It is this astonishingly poised and precise moral vision that connects the multi-narrative films to the three under discussion here: a trilogy of modern horror.

The complexity of Haneke's work can be suggested by admitting at once that different basic approaches to it (not merely different opinions of it) are possible and indeed necessary. Above all the films invite both a philosophical and a political approach: one might read them as attempts to explain human existence, or as passionate protests against the contemporary environment. I am not and have never been a philosopher: I seem to be incapable of abstract thought. My own approach to cinema remains in the widest sense political. Although there are many times nowadays when I find myself sharing Haneke's apparent despair about our world—times when the vastness and enormity of corporate capitalism, and now globalization, seem absolute, irreversible and (worst of all) non-transcendable—I feel compelled to clutch on to an increasingly improbable hope, without which I couldn't write or function, I could merely retreat into a private world of what are now largely lost traditions. And I must assume that Haneke feels the same: otherwise, how could he continue to make films? Even the heroes of Hawks's *Rio Bravo* (the most modern of films), who have nothing to motivate them except the necessity for self-respect, can maintain that self-respect only through committed actions.

All of Haneke's films except *The Castle* take as their starting-point our contemporary predicament: the desensitization and dehumanization of modern life lived beneath the monstrous umbrella of corporate capitalism. In the three films with which I am concerned here this takes different forms, is explored from different angles. *The Seventh Continent* examines (primarily) life within the 'business' world, taking as specific subject a family who appear notably successful (as the business world understands success), financially secure, with everything that capitalism tells

us we need to be happy, who decide to commit joint suicide. *Benny's Video* takes as its primary concern 'noise': both the literal noise with which we are surrounded (or learn to surround ourselves) daily, and the metaphorical 'noise' of the environment, the sense of hurry, of the need for constant distraction, the feeling that every moment must be filled with some form of activity. In the background of both films is the sense of power and disempowerment, the feeling that we have somehow been deprived of individual choice, or that the only choice left us is so drastic as to be appalling. *Funny Games* (which I would agree is the most difficult of the films to understand and justify, impressive and indelible as it is) seems to isolate this theme, reducing it to an almost abstract, almost diagrammatic clarity: a study in naked power and total disempowerment, including the power, literally, over life or death. Taken as a trilogy, the films might be seen as exploring (philosophically but also practically) the question of valid and invalid power: power over oneself, one's actions, one's environment (i.e. awareness and self-knowledge, the very necessities of which Haneke's characters are deprived), versus the power central to contemporary culture, the power of money and technology, the power of the invisible controllers who ultimately own these but who are perhaps themselves enslaved by them, like robots creating other robots. Haneke is the most radical, and therefore the most *necessary*, of contemporary filmmakers.



The Seventh Continent

The Seventh Continent

The exposition of Haneke's first film demands detailed treatment. Masterly in its control, precision and intelligence, it lays the groundwork for all that follows, so that, while we can't predict what is to come (we are shown nothing except the 'normal' banalities of our daily lives), we accept the logic of the denouement, when it arrives, as somehow inescapable. The entire opening ten minutes is in

fact a meticulous concrete realization of the concept of 'making the familiar strange', Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*. Camera movement (here and throughout the film) is minimal, a few slight reframings; the same is true of dialogue. Nothing is spelled out, we have to look beyond the seemingly banal images for their implications. There are very few point-of-view shots and when they occur they tend merely to confirm the blankness of the characters' lives. We are to study these people, not identify with them. We are also not on any account to despise them: Haneke doesn't. His camera looks *at* them, it doesn't *look down on* them, and we are to do the same.

We are introduced to the film's leading couple (in the credit sequence) by their car's number plate (L76 236) as it passes through an automatic carwash: the implication is that a number plate can identify them as well as anything. For the time being they are nameless: we learn much later that they are Georg and Anna. A series of close-ups (as the credits and the car continue on their journey) fragment the vehicle: back window (awash with soapy water so that we can't see inside), a wheel, the front window (occupants still invisible), then at last we are inside, viewing the couple (or more precisely the backs of their heads) from the rear seat. They are completely motionless, completely silent, not touching, no contact of any kind. The image suggests that they are being sucked into some monstrous, inexorable machine or process (the automatic movement of the car through the wash), without protest. Then increasing darkness into which they are swallowed. Then water down the windscreen, like a flood of tears. A sign tells them (in two languages) 'Nicht Bremsen! Do Not Brake': they must not take personal action, just allow themselves to be carried passively forward. The screen becomes almost completely black. The car emerges and drives away past a huge travel poster 'Welcome to Australia', the *false* seventh continent of the title (the real one being death). The journey through the carwash will be repeated, with variations, at the film's two subsequent parts, marking the couple's progress towards their appalling decision.

An intertitle tells us 'First Part: 1987,' then we are in the couple's apartment in the dark, when they are sleeping (as if the carwash was their joint nightmare). An alarm clock beside the bed tells us it is 5.59; we are made to wait for the seconds to tick by, then the digits change to 6.00, the radio switches on, and a new day begins like any other. Still we are denied even so much as a glimpse of a face, the characters defined purely by objects and actions: a hand reaches out to the radio, feet slide into slippers, we see a bathrobe, a chair, a hand pressing a door handle, toothbrushes lined up in a container. The wife (still offscreen) wakes the child Eva (a huddled shape in the bed). Then a man's shoes, laces being tied, a hand feeding the tropical fish, the wife's hands filling the coffee-maker, the husband's briefcase, the breakfast table, with hands reaching for food. The mother's voice: 'Are you ready for school?'—the first line of dialogue beyond the child's name, significantly

addressed to the daughter (husband and wife have not exchanged a single remark). Then the husband's voice ('Your brother's coming over this evening') and the wife's question ('Could you help me with the shopping?'). The car emerges from the automated garage. Blackout—the first of many used for punctuation. We still haven't seen the character's faces, and almost ten minutes of film have gone by.

The car pulls up outside a school; in long shot, her back to us, Eva runs toward the steps. Blackout. The car pauses outside an optician's; in long shot the wife gets out, her back to us, goes inside. Blackout. The car is parked outside a huge factory; in long shot, the husband gets out, his back to us, goes inside. At no point have the characters made contact, shown the least affection, intimacy or concern. Benny, in the next film, will inhabit a world of noise, both literal and metaphorical; similarly, the characters of *The Seventh Continent* occupy a complementary world of silence. Both worlds deny human intercourse, both are representative of modern existence. The silence—the silence of automata—drowns out thought as surely as the noise.

The next segment takes up the three characters' experience of the work places at which we saw them deposited, but in a different order (husband, daughter, wife), and Haneke's strategy is also somewhat different: his purpose now is to make careful distinctions, whereas before the characters seemed (aside from the obvious differences of age and gender) interchangeable. Here and elsewhere we are given very little access to the husband (perhaps because there isn't much to gain access to!), whereas we are permitted a degree of intimacy with the two females. The husband (we at least discover his name) is shown, first, walking through the massive machine rooms of the factory, dwarfed by the machinery, no other human beings in sight. Haneke keeps him always in long shot, and we never hear him speak, the audio track being given to the wife's reading aloud of a letter she has written to his parents (he himself never finds time to write). She tells them of their son's success—he has been transferred to another department where he will have better chances of promotion and he has been given a raise, their financial position is 'excellent'. The one snag: a different boss, incompetent but will retire soon, who 'makes things difficult' for Georg, his probable replacement. Startlingly, Haneke chooses to allow us our first close look in the film at a human face: that of the elderly new boss. Without sentimentalizing him in any way (his expression is at once defensive and hostile, we can understand that he may be 'making things difficult') Haneke shows us a tired, unhappy, man, clearly aware that he is about to be 'dumped' by the firm that has used him for most of his working life, perhaps with a little assistance from Georg. But the wife's letter ends by mentioning 'Eva, our problem child', who hasn't had an asthmatic attack since her visit to her grandparents last winter—the cue for showing the 'problem child' in *her* work environment. The letter ends with 'Georg of course sends his love'. Instant blackout.

Eva, at school, has decided that she is blind. A teacher,

trying hard to be patient but clearly unsympathetic and with no time to waste, manages to expose the fraud but utterly fails to make the essential leap of imagination: that she is dealing with a deeply disturbed child who urgently needs help. Eva, with her wealthy, successful parents who neither beat, molest, materially deprive or in any way cruelly treat her, has no notion of why she is disturbed and unhappy (having absolutely nothing to complain of) yet feels compelled to cry out in some incoherent way. Such a bad little girl.

Her mother, meanwhile, is examining a woman's eyes, for the fitting of new lenses. The patient tells her a horrifying story about her school days and an ugly fat girl with pimples who wanted to be her best friend and tried to disguise the fact that she was extremely shortsighted, and how when the would-be best friend appeared with glasses that made her 'look like a frog' everyone laughed and she peed on the classroom floor. Eva's mother becomes increasingly alienated as this hilarious story goes on, exchanging glances with her equally alienated male assistant. Subsequently, at home, however, she will receive the inevitable phone call from the school authorities about her 'bad little girl', and she will react 'appropriately', first asking the child, with apparent concern, to tell the truth ('I won't harm you'), then abruptly slapping her face (though not very hard) when she tells it. Between these two sequences her parents shop in a supermarket, Haneke's detailing through another series of static close shots making the 'familiar' (packaged, frozen, mass-produced food, rows of identical wine bottles) appear 'strange' indeed, with no eye contact between check-out woman and customers.

At this point of the film Haneke has established his hierarchy: the father, locked into 'business', money, advancement, apparently beyond touch; the mother, drawn by her position into complicity yet occasionally able to feel human feelings, so long as they don't involve her personally (after the slap we see her staring blankly out of the window at the utterly anonymous street and the apartment block's high chain fence); the daughter, the film's human centre and ultimate victim, crying out in the only way she can, silently, for affection, respect, acknowledgement.

The following scene (dinner with the brother, Alexander) marks the beginning of the transition to Part 2, the prelude to the crack in the blank, bland facade of the couple's life. Benny's 'noise' here intrudes like a pre-echo of the next film upon the silence: throughout the meal there is loud 'pop' music on the record player, a song about '...when you smile...', covering the fact that no one has anything to say and doesn't even expect to have. Alexander asks what seasoning his sister has used; she tells him, and he suddenly has tears running down his cheeks, tries to control himself, then ends up sobbing helplessly. After, the three watch television, a programme that clearly means nothing to anyone, but it provokes Alexander's comment: a few days before their mother died, she wondered what it would be like if everyone had a monitor instead of a head,

so that their thoughts could be seen. Haneke gives us full-face close-ups, in the semi-darkness, of the three, and we can see that not only Alexander, not only Anna, but even Georg, has suddenly been touched by the reality of human pain, which amounts to no less than a confession of the repressed despair that lies behind the facade. Part 1 ends with a typical Haneke scene, primitive in its simplicity, eloquent in its effect: a single static shot in which we see no more than a bedside lamp and the human hand that switches it on. Anna's voice: 'Can't you sleep?' Georg's voice: 'No'. The screen is filled abruptly by the 'Australia' travel poster, an image of a beautiful but totally deserted beach, but now a moving image (the waves), 'Australia' transformed into a death dream, peaceful, desolate. Blackout.

This entire astonishing film demands, in its packed precision, to be treated in this detail, but that is obviously impossible here. I must compress.

In his first film Haneke was already setting himself a problem, at once artistic, psychological and technical: How to convince us that a family who appear to have everything we are all supposed to want would decide to commit suicide. He could have made his task a lot easier by telling us at the beginning that the film is based on a 'true' event (if it really happened we must believe it), but he is beyond such pusillanimity and reveals this only at the end, in a final title. When I first saw the film I was impressed but thought it dishonest: it elides the crucial decision, we are not shown the arguments, the discussions, that lead to the decision. My only excuse is that this was my first experience of a Haneke film (and in the rush and muddle of a film festival) and I hadn't yet learnt to trust him. He is in fact far too honest a filmmaker, and far too respectful of his audience, to palm us off with a scene where they sit around a table and discuss the matter. He doesn't *tell* us, he *shows* us, and through specifically cinematic means: not merely images, but the film's basic principle of repetition-with-subtle-variation. Having shown us the crack in the facade, he now takes us again through another 'typical' day in his characters' lives—except that it can no longer be quite typical because it is now experienced differently (by them, by the viewer). We might say that the 'familiar' that was previously 'made strange' for the viewer is now suddenly strange for the characters as well: they have allowed human feelings, pain, doubt, complexity, to enter their lives, and they have confronted the notion that (if their heads were monitors) their thoughts could be read—a notion that inevitably opens them to subterranean thoughts they had previously disallowed.

The repetitions-with-variation of Part 2 (a year later) are much briefer than their originals. The wake-up of the radio is preceded by sexual intercourse, unsatisfying to both, an act of desperation. Instead of Anna's brother to dinner they expect one of Georg's prestigious colleagues, but we are denied the dinner party. It is replaced by the street accident that holds them up on their way home and presents death to them, with its dead bodies under a cover. Then, ending

the relatively brief Part 2, we have the carwash, now filmed differently: Anna, sideview in silhouette, her lips moving but no words. Georg sits motionless, then abruptly looks at her. She turns her face, their eyes meet. Eva is watching from the back seat, aware of everything. Anna's tears run down her face, as if imitating the water streaming down the windscreen. End of Part 2.

Another year has elapsed since Part 2; the decision has been taken, although we don't know this for certain for a considerable time. The family have been visiting Georg's parents (the farewell visit, as we subsequently discover), an agricultural family who represent, certainly, a more fulfilling life, but one to which our civilization can obviously never return (Haneke is no nostalgic sentimentalist). We witness the return home through another set of varied repetitions. Everything seems normal; the first clue we have as to intentions is 'We must cancel our newspaper subscriptions'—which we may register simply as a sign that something has changed. Georg's letter to his parents (yes, he is writing to them at last instead of leaving it to his wife, a significant but in the event ironic sign of 'progress') tells them that he has quit his job. (The letter, recurrent as voice-over through the ensuing scenes, will not be mailed, but stuck on the door to be discovered after they are all dead). We see Eva at school again, the 'problem child' no one has ever really talked with, alienated (all the other girls hold up their arms to answer the question), scratching herself, to her teacher's annoyance. Georg buys an axe and other tools of destruction, then picks up Anna from her optician's. She says goodbye to the colleague who earlier reacted hostilely to the insensitive woman (curiously, and with no real evidence, we feel that he might have helped her). The couple go to the bank and draw out all their money: they are emigrating to Australia.

At this point there is a compressed repeat of the carwash imagery, but here what we see is them *leaving* the carwash (established at the outset as a symbol of the 'automatic'—this time there is no 'Nicht Bremsen') and they are cleaning the car in order to sell it. Anna calls to excuse Eva from school; Georg takes her with him to sell the car. There follows one of the film's most extraordinary sequences. The car sale takes place by the waterfront; as the men bargain, Eva wanders. She watches a boat leaving the harbour (for Australia? Obviously not. But in the child's mind? Another place, anyway; another life—or, given the environment within which she has developed, a death?). A quotation from Alban Berg's violin concerto accompanies the images: the last movement, where Berg in his turn quotes Bach: his setting of the Chorale, *Es ist genug* ('It is enough, Lord, take my soul...'). Haneke marks this clearly as a privileged moment, by breaking one of his own rules: it is the only non-diegetic music in the entire film. The music echoes back through the centuries, and places the suicide within the history of the human race, within the history of all we have lost. Bergman, of course, also quotes Bach in many of his films, yet it never (for me at least) has the resonance of

this moment. What is essential here is the sense of time (human, historical): the juxtaposition of Bach (and the even earlier Chorale from which he quotes), marking the difference between the acceptance of death within a culture in which one can, with a sense of necessary fulfilment, say 'It's enough', and death within the meaninglessness of just another typical life under corporate capitalism. More immediately, Berg dedicated his concerto 'To the memory of an angel'. The confused Eva is not quite an angel, yet one has the feeling that, at this point, Haneke dedicates the film to her. She (yet another unrealized life, that our alleged civilization offers no possibility of fulfilment) becomes the central presence of its own final movement, its emotional core and focus, although she is given no more screen time than her parents.

Although we may already suspect that the emigration is not to Australia but to death, the suspicion is confirmed only as we watch Eva's hand beautifully and painstakingly colouring in a complex pattern she has drawn, the image accompanied by a further instalment of her father's letter: the decision regarding Eva was the hardest (leave her behind, take her with them?), but she had once told him that she would like to die. He completes the letter, and there follows the mercilessly detailed destruction of the apartment: this suicide is to be complete—not merely the physical deaths but the eradication of everything that made up their lives, not merely an action but a 'statement'. We are taken through every step: the destruction of books, photos, clothes, LPs, furniture, the apartment decor; Eva even cuts up her own lovingly created drawings. The rhythm of editing is interrupted for the film's most devastating scene. We hear Anna's voice scream 'Nein!' but it is too late: Georg has raised his axe and smashes the fish tank, water, foliage, fish streaming out across the room. Then Eva runs in, hearing the noise, and promptly erupts into horror and hysteria. Suddenly, through the child's reaction, in the midst of this remorseless movement to death, its reality is brought home (to Eva, to us) through the last gasps of the dying fish in all their different species, and with it the value and multiplicity and wonder of life. Blackout.

The destruction of their way of life ends appropriately with the destruction of money—the life savings they have drawn out of the bank, systematically cut up and flushed down the toilet. The reference is clear: the Freudian association of money with excrement (I remember that, when I was a child, the popular euphemism for shitting was 'Doing your business!'). Then the lengthy sequence of the deaths (Haneke spares us nothing, we are to face the full reality of the couple's arguably heroic, grotesquely perverse actions). Another emotional outburst punctuates the inexorability: Anna suddenly throwing herself, weeping, on the body of her dead child. We are left at the end with Georg (whose death is the most extended—in a sudden rebellion of his body he throws up the first dose of pills and has to repeat the process). As he fades into oblivion, his eyes on the television screen (now showing only 'snow'), he has a series of

memory flashes: the carwash (evoked by the television noise); the dying fish; the elderly business superior he helped send into retirement; Anna weeping in the car... His last image is of Eva. If his head were a monitor, would we be able to read his thoughts?

What do we take away from Haneke's extraordinary debut? A sense of despair and desolation, certainly, but also a strong sense of the immense *potential* value and beauty of human life, a potential in danger of being drowned in the engulfment of our contemporary world.

Benny's Video

Part 1: Up to the murder

I want to approach *Benny's Video* obliquely, from a concern that may at first seem totally irrelevant. I have often tried to figure what artist, or what specific body of work, for me, would represent the ideal human sensibility, and my answer for many years now has been Mozart. (I could narrow it further to the three operas Mozart composed to texts by da Ponte). Here, it seems to me, is embodied most completely the synthesis of all the qualities and complexities that make up the fullness of what we think of as human nature at its finest: masculine and feminine, power and gentleness, force and compassion, strength, sensitivity, tenderness, generosity, intuitive understanding, spontaneity and control...everything somehow fused, in a way that seems

miraculous to us today, in a single inexhaustibly astonishing creativity: an image of the full human being. The question this leads me to is, Can we imagine, today, even by the utmost stretch of the imagination, such a completed sensibility at once forming itself within and being informed by our culture? It could not, obviously, be the same or similar, the Mozartian sensibility being formed within a highly specific cultural situation; I am talking about equivalents, a recognizably *modern* sensibility that somehow achieved a comparable completeness. After much struggle I have come up with two which at least don't appear merely risible (both are from music, for me the highest of the arts): the (so-called) neo-classical works of Stravinsky's French period (and intermittently later), and the string quartets of Vagn Holmboe. Both have something of the emotional and creative complexity; neither remotely approaches the completeness and richness, both appear somewhat thin and impoverished in the comparison, extraordinary achievements as they are. I am also not claiming that they represent the most important achievements of twentieth century music. Most of our greatest artists have been driven by the evolution of the dominant culture, not merely into an attempt to construct a complex sensibility aside from it, but into the bitterness of direct opposition, the expression of rage, protest, fear, despair, dislocation, alienation. The striving toward a human completeness has been replaced by a sense of the irrevocably lost or broken and irreparable.

Benny's Video



Benny's Video



Mozart's music was fed by his culture in its wholeness, he lived and worked at its very heart; Stravinsky's and Holmboe's were created despite theirs, in different kinds of isolation, they merely drew what they could use from the cultural margins, the dominant culture didn't support or nourish them.

Irrelevant? I don't think so. For one thing, these concerns have sprung, once again, spontaneously into my mind whilst watching or thinking about Haneke's film. And, after all, isn't the entire film singlemindedly concerned with the development and definition of a particular human sensibility within our modern culture? This characteristically 'cold', 'detached', 'clinical' work is among the most heart-breaking films I have ever experienced, among my most indelible emotional engagements with contemporary cinema. All this not simply because of what happens to its characters (centrally, of course, to Benny himself) but because of the horrifyingly immediate sense it gives me of the reality of the world within which I have to live. Which is precisely why it has to be 'cold, detached, etc...'—if it wasn't I could just have a good cry and forget about it.

Benny's world is a sub-world of the one we all live in today, instantly recognizable; none of us is untouched by it, though we may put up a certain resistance. Its underlying *raison d'être* seems to be the prevention of thought, beyond the kind of automatic thinking needed to get through a day's living in it: one must never have, or even wish to have, a moment in which to sit quietly and reflect. Its function is to sustain, by the repression of thought, the larger world of corporate capitalism, the world in which all of us live without choice. A moment with nothing to do? Slap on your headphones, slip in a cassette, turn up the volume, push in a video, press the button: a feast for the eyes and ears, deafening and blinding, a violent and instant anaesthetic. It shouldn't be difficult, today, for any of us to identify with Benny.

We were told of all the wonders the technological revolution would bring, the way our lives would be trans-

formed: so much of our work would be done for us, we would have all that extra time for ourselves, for our leisure, development, reflection—time to relax, listen to music, read, discuss things with our friends, think, lead a more fully human existence. Does anyone now believe that this has been the outcome? I think the exact opposite is the case: we all feel more pressured, more harassed, everything has speeded up, become more urgent. Far from working for a few hours and having the rest of their time for leisure, most people work the same hours as before but are now dominated by machines that seem to control them, silently shouting instructions in their faces, urging them rhythmically 'Faster, faster, speed it up, more production, more production...', so that all they are capable of when they finish is to collapse in front of a television screen soaking in the sitcoms and commercials that say, generically, 'More products, more products, you need this, it's good for you, it will make you happy at last, buy, buy, buy...' But buy with what? 'Money—make more money, even more, and more...work harder, build up your credit cards, pay by instalments...' I agree with Haneke: the world we've created (or *allowed* to be created by 'business') is indeed a kind of hell, in which affluent families commit suicide, teenage boys murder teenage girls without the least motivation, and (in the multi-narrative films) no one can pause and reflect and make a responsible decision.

Will there—can there now—ever come a time when we can learn to control technology instead of being controlled by it? Because there is no turning back: Haneke's occasional (usually brief) references to a 'lost' agricultural world (Georg's parents in *The Seventh Continent*, certain plot threads of *Code Inconnu*) never offer it as an 'answer' or suggest that a return is possible. But, with globalization hanging over us, accompanied in many parts of the world (including, crucially, the United States, the new 'Evil Empire') by a swing to the Right, all we can know for sure is that everything will get worse: opening one's morning newspaper today becomes an act of courage. Technology, and our lives, will remain under the control of corporate capitalism, money will remain not only our goal but our god. Only world revolution could overthrow this, a possibility at present so remote as to be virtually unimaginable, as we have all been indoctrinated with the sense that it is the last thing in the world we could possibly need or want. We're all happy now, aren't we? Benny, whose parents are obviously 'stinking rich' and who has everything his heart believes it could desire, seems to believe himself happy, in so far as he can reflect at all. The last thing he needs is money, yet he is obsessed with the hectic party games he plays with his... what?... one cannot call them friends, as there appears to be no affection or intimacy involved... games in which huge sums of money are at stake.

Benny's world has one other vital component, again one we are all surrounded by daily in various forms: violence. A typical 6.00 a.m. start to my day: a mug of black coffee, the morning paper: more corruption, more scams, more

'takeovers', more swings to the Right, more homeless on our streets, more starving children, more battered wives, but also murders, massacres, wars, tortures, gang violence, police violence, violence here at home, violence everywhere else in the world. Right here in Canada, a relatively affluent country, child poverty has reached unprecedented heights. Our (Liberal!!!) Government says 'Tsk, tsk, we must do something about this', and proceeds to invest its taxpayers' money in a 'multinational giant' developing genetically engineered foods (I kid you not, it's right here before my eyes in this morning's edition). Some days one has difficulty finding a single item that offers any encouragement. What is really terrifying is that today these things can be exposed and *it doesn't make one scrap of difference*. The corporations now run everything and they are far too powerful to care. Benny does not, apparently, read newspapers (or anything else), but he is surrounded by (and obsessively surrounds himself with) violent imagery (either 'real', from newsreels, or fabricated, in works of popular entertainment), accompanied by appropriately violent music on his hi-fi or his headphones. Perhaps none of it is quite real to him except the images of the slaughter of the pig, the only death he has actually witnessed, which, significantly, he recorded himself and plays back obsessively in slow motion so that he can linger on every detail, trying perhaps to locate the exact split second of death.

Haneke clearly associates the propensity to violence with the influence of aggressive 'rock' music. I raised at the outset the question of his attitude to today's popular culture, and want to develop this briefly here. As things stand the attitude appears totally negative, reaching its extreme expression in the first minutes of *Funny Games* where, on the soundtrack, the most violent, dissonant rock (barely more than 'noise') abruptly annihilates the opera cassettes the couple are listening to in the car. I don't listen to rock music myself, but my attitude is somewhat more ambivalent. What I want from Haneke is at least some acknowledgement that it constitutes for young people a form (however incoherent) of rebellion and protest, almost the only one they have left, its violence being directed against the Establishment. The problem here is not simple. Clearly, this form of protest is easily co-opted and ultimately helpless. It offers a *fantasy* of revolution rather than the real thing. For the dominant culture it becomes a means not so much of expressing rage as of defusing it, turning it aside from its logical expression in political action. Thus the hypocrisy of the Establishment: it denounces the immorality, the violence, the aggression, the obscenities, the deliberately shocking texts, yet it knows it needs them to provide a necessary outlet. Here indeed 'the medium is the message': the 'noise' completely overwhelms and eventually replaces the possibility of radical action. The same is true of drugs, which the Establishment, as the Guardians of Morality, must necessarily denounce in order to conceal an immorality that makes any mere lawbreaking appear trivial in the extreme, but which are absolutely necessary to its continu-

ance: your next 'fix' will deflect you, nothing more effectively, from any temptation you may feel to organize politically, it will above all stop you *thinking*. And if you OD, well, there's one more unwanted and inconvenient figure out of the way. .

Why does Benny kill the young girl—a person of relatively unsophisticated tastes (her notions of entertainment not rising above Roger Rabbit), clearly less affluent, less corrupted? There are a number of immediate, subsidiary incentives, but one must note that his *first* impulse (casual, perhaps at a lower level very serious) is suicide: he is showing her the stun gun with which the pig was slaughtered and which he stole from the farmer (having just regaled her with the video); he puts it in her hands, turns it on himself, and tells her to pull the trigger. When she refuses he calls her a coward. She gives him the gun, now pointed at herself, and tells *him* to shoot. When he won't, she makes her crucial error: 'You are a coward.' He pulls the trigger, as if automatically; she falls. Fundamentally, though, Benny kills her because he can't *think*: the 'noise' of his culture has deafened him, numbing his capacity for anything except spontaneous, mindless action; the constant environment of violence in sound and image has blurred any distinction between the real and the fabricated. And he continues to be unable to think when he has wounded her (her life could still be saved), when she is on the floor, bleeding, in great pain, screaming for help: all he can do is at any cost stop her noise, a real, human, terrifying noise, not something on a video soundtrack, as quickly as possible, desperately reloading, firing, having to reload again, firing, until all noise stops.

Haneke's shooting of the scene (and its aftermath, the cleaning up) is exemplary of his intelligence, discipline and attitude. The cleaning up sequence inevitably (and I presume intentionally) evokes its equivalent in *Psycho*, at least part of the point being to emphasize that the presentation of the murder itself is the direct opposite. Where Hitchcock places us in the shower with Marion, sharing every split second of her brief ordeal, Haneke cuts away at the moment the girl falls to the ground, to the video machine that is recording the entire event. But the video is not recording the *action*: it does not frame the girl as she struggles to crawl away, but the blank space she has left. We hear her dreadful screams and cries for help; we hear Benny's absurd, anguished plea ('Be quiet, please!'), we see him moving frantically back and forth to reload; we hear the shots, and then the terrible silence that follows the last. But we have been kept at a rigorous distance from the actual display of violence.

The film has explained to me why I now lose interest in *Psycho* after Norman watches Marion's car sink into the swamp: from that point on I want to know about Norman, not about these rather nondescript people who try to find out things I have already witnessed. I want to know how he reacts, how he behaves. And this is precisely what Hitchcock can't show us, for two reasons: superficially,

because the plot restrictions (conveniently?) make it clear that Norman never understands that *he* has committed the murders; more fundamentally, because the Hollywood genre cinema (dedicated to the concept of 'popular entertainment') could not accommodate anything so challenging and disturbing (the challenge and disturbance of *Psycho's* subsequent shocks and revelations being relatively superficial). Haneke shows us, in meticulous detail and with profound and sympathetic psychological insight, what Hitchcock couldn't (and perhaps never wanted to). Most of the (sparse) commentary I have read on the film concentrates on the murder, seldom rising above the level of 'Oh dear, what are our young people coming to?' The second half of the film—the presentation and analysis of Benny's subsequent development—is arguably the more remarkable.

Part 2: Beyond the murder

In their halting, awkward conversation just before he kills her, we see Benny, for the first time in the film, allowing himself to become engaged in a kind of tentative intimacy with another human being (very different from, for example, his relationship with his friend Ricci, where conversation is exclusively about what diversion they will attend next). Crucially, the girl is the only person in whom he has confided, quite spontaneously and naturally, his secrets (it is clearly important that she is not as impressed as he thinks she ought to be). Their brief moment of mutual reaching out (she being apparently as lonely as he is, she in her solitariness, he among all his 'friends') becomes very poignant in retrospect; after the murder, Benny will live his life in a kind of self-imposed isolation, progressively alienated from everything and everybody in his environment, including and especially his father.

The rest of the film is devoted to charting, obliquely, Benny's hesitant and reluctant progress toward some kind of tentative salvation. His impulse to confession is there from the outset, but initially its motivation is ambiguous: what, after all, can you do when you have the body of a girl you have murdered right there with you in your apartment? He goes out with Ricci to what today we would call a 'rave', spends the night in his apartment, wants to tell him something, can't. Then we see him back at the video store where it all began. But now he is standing outside, in the girl's place, looking in the window, as if he was somehow now identifying himself with her or wanting to resurrect her. He goes to his elder sister's apartment to talk to her, but she is not at home. He wanders the streets at night (his parents are still away, only a couple of days have passed). Suddenly he is in front of a barber's window, and spontaneously, with no apparent conscious motivation, takes his first decisive action: he goes in and has his head shaved. Haneke offers no explanation for the action; as so often in his films, the spectator is left to draw his/her own conclusions, to formulate what is implicit but unstated. The father tries out various explanations, mostly sarcastic, it never occurring to him that Benny's gesture constitutes a plea for help: he wants to

attract attention, it is 'teenage alienation', he wants to be a 'skinhead, a Baby Bandit', he wants to impress people, he is trying to get at his parents (and obviously succeeding in that, at least, however inadvertently): all quite beside the point, all based in the father's sense of self-importance and personal affront. The barber scene follows closely upon Benny's replacing the girl in the shop window, identifying with her as victim. The father, quite unwittingly, hits upon one relevant suggestion: Benny looks like something out of Auschwitz, a concentration camp survivor. Precisely: he is both presenting himself as victim and degrading himself. The shaven head is his first clear step toward confession. Eventually he is forced (from practical necessity? From urgent inner need?) to reveal the truth: he shows his parents the videotape of the murder.

Benny's parents constitute a variation on Georg and Anna in *The Seventh Continent*. Again, the father (as primary breadwinner, with a prestigious position in the business world) is dominant, the mother always subservient to him but showing signs of an assertion of selfhood. Here, however, largely because of an absence (the trip to Egypt, to get Benny away) she is able to develop this further, though still not far enough to become effective (which would involve confrontation and rejection, of which she proves incapable). If the film pushes the mother-figure further in one direction, it accordingly pushes the father in the opposite. Georg, as the film developed, elicited a certain sympathy, from his very decision (perverse and negative as it was) to enrol his family in communal suicide: the gesture demonstrated at least a new awareness of his own emptiness. Nothing redeems Benny's father, though he remains horrifyingly real, totally secure in his sense of his own worth and his position, an upright and justifiably proud and prominent member of his society who is also capable of cutting into tiny pieces and immolating the body of an innocent young girl his son has casually murdered, not for his son's sake but for the sake of his own position and career.

Two extended sequences (separated by a brief scene of Benny put to bed for the night)—the first, the father's interrogation of Benny in the mother's presence, the second, the parents' (somewhat onesided) discussion as to what course of action to take—are central to the film. Unlike anything else in the film, both are shot entirely in intercut close-ups of the participants, Haneke insisting upon their strict separateness within the frame. In both, the emphasis is on the dominant figure, the father, so that the first sequence becomes, for the spectator, less the father's verbal interrogation of Benny than Haneke's merciless visual interrogation of the father, his every expression (or lack of it) subjected to scrutiny. He shows no concern whatever for the innocent young victim, who is now just an inconvenient lump of human flesh and bone to be disposed of somehow. Nor does he show any real concern for his son, treating him as yet another inconvenience, a problem to be solved: if they give Benny up to the police, psychiatric care is the best they can hope for; 'That will ruin his life. Not to speak of other

consequences. Exactly what a career needs...'

The second sequence is centred on the father's cold calculation of the physical realities of body disposal ('They'll have to be very small pieces, otherwise they'll block the drains') and the mother's increasing sense of disbelief (Angela Winkler is quite extraordinary here) as she begins to grasp just what her husband *is*, expressing itself in half-suppressed giggles and nervous smiles. She eventually manages to come out with, hesitantly, 'Do you know what you are saying?' To which he responds, firmly, 'What we are saying,' locking her in to the macabre enterprise.

The intervening scene of Benny in bed seems at the time mere punctuation but subsequently proves crucial to the outcome: Benny asks that his door be left open, then that the further door also be left open. We take it he is beginning to suffer from fears of the dark, fears of aloneness. But the real necessity for the scene is revealed at the end in a brief flashback: from his bed, Benny has overheard every word of the conversation.

The father's decision necessitates Benny's absence, so his mother takes him on a trip to Egypt, on the trumped-up pretext of a grandmother's funeral. Two things happen to Benny in Egypt: he begins to develop a tentative, inexplicit intimacy with his mother (as she, away from her husband, develops an equally tentative independence of thought and feeling); and he discovers that there is a world beyond the 'noise' of his videos and headphones and 'raves' and money games. He goes swimming and parasailing; he channel-hops on the hotel television but comes to rest, not on a 'hard rock' video, but on images of a cathedral accompanied by organ music (we knew earlier that he sang in a choir, whilst the angelic-looking boys surreptitiously passed messages and sums of money along the row); most important, he turns his own video camera outside himself, to record pieces of the world and its history: ancient villages, ruins, city streets, poverty, hungry children begging... The film's very title begins to change its meaning: what, in the end, is 'Benny's video'?—the slaughter of the pig? the murder of the girl? the images of a world beyond him? Finally, it is a video of himself: before the return home he sets up the video camera and records himself talking. At last Benny is looking at himself, so that he can at last see who he is.

So, finally, the return home. The father drives them from the airport and talks about his work: there is a new operating system, 'I dread to think what's waiting for me tomorrow. But enough about me...' And they talk about Benny's sunburn for a few minutes. The mother, who, just before the end of the trip, underwent a sudden breakdown in the hotel bedroom, sobbing uncontrollably, rapidly reintegrates herself. Benny tries to, briefly, but can't. His father tells him, as he says goodnight, 'I'm glad you're back. I love you', but Benny is not impressed. Subsequently he tries going out with Ricci, he tries loud rock music, tries the money game (in which his parents suddenly take a positive interest). He sings in the choir concert for which he was rehearsing earlier, his parents attending. Then the flash-

back: Benny recalling his parents' overheard conversation ('It will have to be very small pieces...'). Without a cut, the soundtrack merges into Benny's interview with the police: 'And why are you here now?' 'Because.' That 'because' would require the whole film for an explanation. He tells them where his parents can be found, and as he passes them on their way into the interrogation room he tells them 'Sorry'—apparently believing that he will be allowed to go free, now that he has confessed. But confessed to what? Certainly, to an unpardonable (but what is unpardonable, if we know the background?) crime. What more can be said?

Benny's Video is, I think, the only Haneke film which culminates in some form of salvation. The only uneasiness I feel about it is that Haneke (one recalls his admiration for Bresson) may wish us to see it as a specifically religious salvation (the cathedral image on the television in Egypt, the organ music, the choir concert that immediately precedes Benny's decision to confess). This is, of course, my personal prejudice nudging in. I would end by saying that, if that is what Haneke had in mind, the religious references are merely trite and perfunctory. The strength of the film lies in its depiction of its eponymous protagonist's progressive alienation from and rejection of his cultural situation, his 'world'. What alternative world he could find to replace it is indeed a question.

A Note on *Funny Games*

Brilliant and unforgettable as it is, *Funny Games* is clearly a minor work, the least of the films Haneke has both written and directed, a deliberately limited 'chamber' piece with little of the social/political resonance of the other four. It is most unfortunate, then, that it is the film that has attracted the most attention. Haneke has consistently told his audiences things they don't want to hear and shown them things they don't want to see, yet the films' self-evident truth and honesty made them difficult to reject or attack. That is why he is among the most important living filmmakers. If *Funny Games* must be seen as a mistake (and I really can't make up my mind about this), it is because it gave audiences the chance to rebel, to vent their indignation. Fascinating as I find the film (on obvious levels it is a *tour-de-force*—could anyone stop watching it after the first ten minutes?), it always leaves me asking *why* I have been put through this 90-odd minutes of agonized tension and distress: what rewards do I take away? No other Haneke film leaves me with this feeling. It seems to have turned audiences against *all* his work, as if the film had suddenly exposed the barrenness of the films that preceded it. When I saw *Code Inconnu* at a press screening during last autumn's Toronto Film Festival, the auditorium was half empty, and I did not find a single review or even acknowledgement that the film existed; it seemed to me arguably the most important of the twenty-five films I saw. A friend

of mine who has seen only *Funny Games* now absolutely refuses to watch any other Haneke film.

The interesting thing about *Funny Games* is, in fact, precisely the way in which Haneke appears deliberately to block off every attempt one makes to find a reading that will give it the kinds of resonance (and relevance) one looks for in his films. It's as if he wanted the film to exist in a kind of chilly isolation, impregnable to interpretation. Perhaps, after *Benny's Video*, he felt it necessary to make his own idiosyncratic horror film, a horror film that would leave the audience, at the end, still locked into the horror, denying them any of the forms of catharsis that the genre has traditionally supplied. It is this systematic *blocking* of meaning that I want to examine here.

First, however, it should be noted that Haneke in fact apparently offered his own apologia for the film. Frustratingly, I have never been able to track down the original source and context, and have it only from references and partial (mis-?)quotations. Roughly, then, and perhaps misleadingly, his intention was to punish the audience for *wanting* violence. There are two ways of interpreting this, neither of which makes any sense. 1. The audience wants to watch the nice upper-bourgeois family humiliated, tortured and murdered and is made to suffer for this desire. This might work if the audience for Haneke's films were the one with whom I once viewed *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* at night in a crowded auditorium: they cheered and whistled at every one of Leatherface's butcheries, urging him on. But can Haneke really believe that this is the audience that goes to his films, screened mainly at festivals or in Cinematheques? He doesn't strike me as stupid. No one who is likely to attend a screening of *Funny Games* is likely to *desire* the violence (primarily psychological) that we watch being inflicted. 2. The audience wants to see the two young tormentors meet the most horrible deaths possible. This makes a bit more sense: when I watch the film I must admit that I, a committed pacifist, want to leap into the screen and batter them to death with my own hands. The problem here is that I am never punished for this wish: I feel exactly the same, if not more so, when the film ends. Its danger, in fact, seems to me that it could be read (somewhat simplistically) as a plea for capital punishment. I know of one film that really achieves both the above possible aims, and it is in every way the exact opposite of Haneke's: *Last House on the Left*, Wes Craven's notorious reworking of Bergman's *Jungfrukallen*, his first and still, surely, best film, a study in ultra-violence that spares its audience nothing and punishes them very thoroughly for wanting violence against *either* the bourgeois family *or* its persecutors.

The problems of interpretation in *Funny Games* arise from Haneke's presentation of the family, but even more from his presentation of the killers.

1. The family.

Once again, as in *The Seventh Continent* and *Benny's Video*, we have a family of three—father, mother, child. (True,

Benny has an elder sister, but she doesn't live at home and has only a very small role). But, unlike the previous sets of parents, the father and mother of *Funny Games* are presented more sympathetically than critically. Once again they are wealthy (with a summer house by a lake, a yacht, expensive golf clubs, etc...), but they are given none of the negative attributes of their predecessors (we can hardly hold it against them that they love Italian opera and pass the time in the car testing each other's knowledge of music and singers). If they have a fault it is that they are perhaps somewhat complacent, secure in their money and position, and quite insulated from the realities of the modern world (which break in violently when the opera cassette is abruptly drowned out by an outburst of raucous, dissonant rock music on the soundtrack). If we can feel that Benny's father (absolutely) and mother (for allowing herself to remain complicit) deserve their punishment, we can't feel anything of this here. We can't really fault the mother's treatment of Peter (the first of the two intrusive young men) when he comes to the kitchen door to ask for eggs—yes, she shows mild annoyance when he 'accidentally' smashes them, but wouldn't you? The little boy is entirely blameless, and later proves admirably (if ineffectually) resourceful. Haneke carefully blocks off any animus we might feel toward these people; we have no reason to want them punished.

2. The young killers (Peter and Paul, subsequently Tom and Jerry or Beavis and Buttthead).

The film's basic problem (and also its distinctiveness) arises from Haneke's equally careful blocking of any possible explanation for their behaviour (other than some mysterious, quasi-metaphysical malevolence). The most obvious explanation, giving them a certain validity, would be to do what Craven did in *Last House on the Left* (and Bergman before him): make them representatives of an oppressed, dispossessed lower class, ignorant and poor; Haneke presents them as well-spoken, well-dressed, educated, apparently from a background little different from the family's. A second explanation is given us by Paul, the dominant partner, in his heartbreaking account of Peter's family history of abuse, cruelty and oppression that has turned him into a psychological wreck—which turns out to be a macabre joke, a parodic sob-story enthusiastically acted out by Peter as Paul tells it. The two haven't even come to rob the house, purely to torment.

Further, the young men appear to have superhuman powers: they never sleep, they are completely tireless. We first see them (without any knowledge of who they are or what they are doing) with the next door neighbours as the couple drive up to their vacation home. We (and the couple) see them only in distant long-shot, anonymous figures; the couple wonder why their friends are barely speaking, behaving so oddly and distantly, and it's only later that we realize they were being held under threat and were about to be murdered. Peter comes to the door for the eggs barely a half-hour later (the other family having been disposed



of, or the job left to Paul, who follows ten minutes later). It is late afternoon; the young men pass the night tormenting the family, then, having murdered them all, leave all fresh and jaunty in the family yacht to visit the next family along the lake.

But if both appear superhuman, Paul is granted supernatural powers. He alone is aware of the camera, aware an audience is watching, and he knows (because he comments on the fact) that the film has to reach feature length: he looks at us, smirks, invites our complicity in what he is doing (which of course makes us hate him more than ever); eventually it turns out that he can control the film, picking up the remote control when things turn briefly against him and rewinding to do it again differently. It is at this point, I think, that we finally abandon all attempts to interpret him: he is not a human being but some force of pure malevolence, a demon from hell if you like. As he sets off in the yacht at the end to continue the orgy of destruction, his final look into camera confirms his absolute power even as it seems to ask us, sarcastically, if we've been enjoying ourselves. Is Paul somehow, for Haneke, a crystallization of all the evils of the modern world, with its tendency to depersonalization, to the failure of empathy or generosity or compassion? Perhaps, but this is never clear.

I don't think I have ever been as disturbed by a fictional film as I have been by *Funny Games*, and the disturbance is obviously due in great measure to its apparent emptiness: I would not be so disturbed if I felt I had taken from the film something that it obstinately refuses to give me. I don't know why I have been put through this. Part of me would like to reject the film as securely and contemptuously as oth-

ers have done (it's merely 'sadistic', etc.), but I can't: its effect is too powerful, Haneke's control and assurance too perfect, every shot so perfectly judged. (Can one ever forget the long-held, completely static long-shot at the midpoint when the couple, in the middle of the night, given a brief respite, their child dead, the young men apparently gone, simply sit holding each other, the wife shaking with sobs?).

I suggested that *Benny's Video* evoked *Psycho*, and if there is a single film with which *Funny Games* can be compared it is again Hitchcock, in this case *The Birds*. In some ways the comparison is remarkably close, so that again one wonders whether Hitchcock's film was consciously in Haneke's mind. Hitchcock said *The Birds* was about 'complicity'; Haneke might say the same of *Funny Games*. The birds themselves, like Peter and Paul, are never explained: we never learn why they are attacking; again they seem to embody some kind of malevolent force. The endings of the two films are in some ways similar (though Hitchcock at least lets his human characters survive, however ambiguously and provisionally): the birds, like Paul, are still there, undefeated, perhaps just resting before the next attack. The unpredictable, the arbitrary, have always played a major role in Haneke's films (not for nothing is one entitled *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance*), and certainly *Funny Games* offers the ultimate statement of this. But if it reduces to a simple message ('Keep watching! Be aware! Be vigilant!'), the ordeal we have been put through feels somewhat disproportionate.

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Voice and Body

Ahead of the Curve and Scouts Are Cancelled

DARRELL VARGA

Over images of the rehearsal of a modern dance performance, acclaimed choreographer Christopher House says: "There is a physical suit of armor that men are forced to wear. There's a kind of anti-sensual physicality, so that men don't want to own their own bodies and consequently it's much more difficult for them to have any connection to their feelings. So that when feelings do kind of break outside of the envelope it can explode into violence." The arts documentary *Christopher House: Ahead of the Curve* (2007) explores the complex process through which modern dance comes into being, where the pleasure of feeling

explodes in the physicality of movement.¹ We see the labour of dance as physical intensity and as joy. While the artist works intuitively, this process does not simply come out of thin air; it is grounded in the space of creative collaboration, a

gorgeous shots of the dancer's body are set against the landscape of his travels and of his home. Geography is a state of mind as well as physical locale, and as much as this artist must leave home to become himself, the space of home travels with him. Another film would perhaps pursue the subject of coming out in St. John's in the 1970s; this one chooses to focus on creative practice in the present. There is a seductive calm to House's voice, but for me this too is a kind of armor, shaping the way we see the present. House speaks of the beauty of the Newfoundland landscape, but appreciating it in the present, in contrast with his childhood sense of place, which he describes as the "wait for the slow arrival of what is happening in the rest of the world." Yet he generously describes the lack of pretension in Newfoundland, and how this has helped him to avoid taking himself too seriously, a disposition that allows his dancers to take risks in creative collaboration. This is an artist who has internalized a sense of place in order to see out into the world.

The film's primary performance focus is on House's innovative and award winning dance show *Timecode Break*, made in 2006 in collaboration with video artist Nico Stagias (who also edits this documentary). Here we are offered a shift from the everydayness of body and landscape to the intensity of the cool media as backdrop for the hot dancers.² This intermedia collaboration allows a McLuhanite transformation of the body. Dancers on stage accompany themselves as projected onto a screen at the rear of the stage and we witness an overturning of the laws of physics. The video body is able to move in ways that defy gravity. What we see is both embodied and organic—technologized and set free of the constraints of place. The tension between organic and mediated body recalls, in a way, House's description of masculinity—here as well the screen is both armor and passageway. The dichotomy also informs the process of representation, as Nico Stagias explains of how he created the video footage of the dancers for this performance: "I'd come in and just shoot them at rest or in

Ahead of the Curve



world of ideas, of personal history, and the experiences of moving in the world. All of this is brought together in what the artist describes as: "an intelligence of the body that comes through conscious practice. So that you develop this relationship with your body as an instrument, but also with your body as who you are...The tension of that activity is what makes the dance happen."

The film is directed by Newfoundland filmmaker Rosemary House, his sister, and the discussion includes the (not uncommon) experience of leaving Newfoundland. House describes his departure from the region as necessary and inevitable, to escape what he describes at the time as a "very homophobic environment." In turn, we see the subject immersed in the fast pace of the multicultural city and



Timecode Break

casual conversation. My camera kept rolling. I wanted to find some casual, undancerly moments that would capture their personalities.”³ The video material includes dance segments altered through editing and motion effects, but also documentary style “decisive moments” that have a found footage quality with an intimacy drawing us toward the screen. The film, in turn, is a document of the coming-into-being of a collaborative process, setting into motion the space of the stage and a way of seeing the body in the interstice of culture and a place called home.

If, in *Ahead of the Curve*, the performative gaze is located on the digital stage, in *Scouts Are Cancelled* (Directed by John D. Scott, 2007) about poet John Stiles, we witness a performance of a decidedly analog voice where the vernacular emerges in-between rural and urban, region and centre.⁴ The enigmatic title comes from Stiles’s first book of poetry, consisting of stories drawn from the rural area of Annapolis Valley, Nova Scotia, where the poet grew up, and in the cadence and tone of the region, as suggested by some of his poem titles: “Givver Jimmie Givver,” “Little Buggers,” and “Fer the Pardy.” But Stiles does not live in the Valley any longer. We see him in Toronto, first at the Insomniac Press launch party for *Scouts are Cancelled*, where he proclaims himself as clearly not part of the Toronto art scene, being instead from “tinbucket Nova Scotia,” and in the city where he carried out a litany of dead-end jobs and lived broke and at the margins. While working at a call centre he begins to craft his rural voice, beginning some calls with what is to become an on-stage character: “How ya doon anight?” This voice evolved into the performance poems that lead to his first book contract and, surprisingly, to great success as a telemarketer. Whether giving phone or givvener on stage, the vernacular voice is at a distance from the “real,” and in this way the film raises interesting questions about representation, the idea of home, of voice, and memory—all of which inform documentary practice as a whole.

In this respect, films can be interesting for what they do

not show as much as for what is on screen. While we see Stiles perform the voice and characters of the Valley, an on-camera trip home provides a degree of disconnect. We do not meet any of the local characters described in the poems and we do not see images of labour in the apple orchards even though this is important economically to the region and is prominent in the poems. The result is a kind of mythologization of place—place is performed rather than lived materially and this is consistent with the overall decline of rural economies and populations. The filmmaker has indicated to me that some of the characters important to Stiles simply were unavailable or unwilling to be on camera and this does point to the practical contingencies that come to bare on the film text, but by signaling these absences the film indicates a broader disconnect between the idea of home, material reality, the function of memory, and the performative act of writing through which these elements are evoked and transformed.⁵ Filmmaker and subject are longtime friends and the film is as much about growing old and holding onto alternatives for one’s life. The way that the filmmaker looks at his subject is similar to the ways that we look to the movies—both for reflection of our experiences in the material world and to fulfill a desire unmet in the world. This contradiction is where contemporary documentary is located.

The filmmaker suggests that he is fascinated with Stiles’s “vagabond spirit” and resistance to the conformist world. Contemporary footage is intercut with segments titled “Memorybank Movie” and these consist of footage of filmmaker and subject “on the road” in their youth, signifying a free spiritedness and with explicit references to Jack Kerouac. The filmmaker then positions himself as presently outside of that mode of freedom—we see still images of his family with young child, his house, his minivan. When we hear the filmmaker’s voice, it is made distant through a degraded recording suggestive of the disconnect between representation and material reality. The degraded quality of the voice is evocative both of the material conditions under



which the film's subject lives, but also of the form of the film, emerging as it does from a low-budget DIY sensibility. The filmmaker explains the formal challenges of inserting his own voice in a film that is about voice: "Once it sounded clean and professional the lines I read sounded forced, self-important and authoritative. When the voice is compromised a little it does feel more distant, more playful."⁶ Again, this sense of distance mirrors the relation between Stiles and his subject material as well as our own mediated engagement with the film.

On the road with Stiles in the present is a kind of portrait of the artist as outsider in conformist times. They are traveling through rural Nova Scotia on a book tour and from behind the wheel we see the artist working and reworking the precise rhythm of a line of poetry, but the car breaks down on the way to their first stop in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia. We later see Stiles at a table in the mall outside of a bookstore but no one is stopping to buy and old geezers glide past in motorized wheelchairs. At a public library reading only two chairs are occupied. I should emphasize that the poems themselves are really compelling and highly entertaining, and in other scenes there is a more recep-

tive audience, but the cumulative effect is to raise questions about the place of the artist in technocratic society and to evoke the complex and often disconnected relationship between artist, audience and subject material, as well as the process of cinematic representation and the corresponding relation we have, as audience for the film, to all of this.

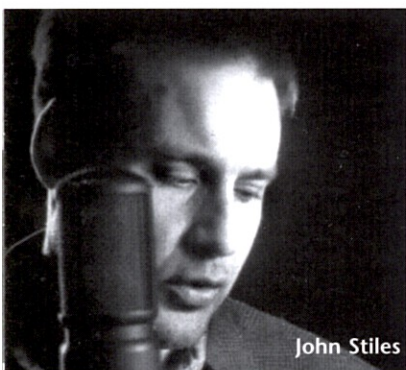
Taken together, these two films point to two competing approaches to regional filmmaking. *Ahead of the Curve* is decidedly urban, we see the subject shaped by his Newfoundland origins but also immersed in the creative energy of the Toronto (and international) art scene. He has a measure of success—as an artist but also materially insofar as we see his well-appointed downtown apartment and studio-retreat on Toronto Islands. There is no lament for an

idealized home, but the film suggests how concepts of place are carried with us as we imagine and create new spaces and places. *Scouts Are Cancelled* raises the question of the vernacular and the regional, and how far these elements can be carried outside of their place of origin. In a way, then, both films tell us something of the place of art within contemporary capitalism. *Ahead of the Curve* is itself a beautiful and seductive object with a broad degree of market appeal (it is commissioned by BRAVO). *Scouts Are Cancelled* shows us the artist in dire poverty and offers, following the themes of many of the poems, a critique of contemporary relations under capitalism—urban sprawl, alienation, and loss of community. The film itself is gritty and spare and comes out of an indie art film oeuvre. When Stiles does (briefly) land a "respectable" job teaching high school literature, what we see on film is the tedium of his long downtown to remote suburb commute by public transit and his utter boredom as students flatly read in class. For them, the idea of the vernacular is just another subject. What does it mean to us?

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Notes

- 1 For details on the film, see <www.rockisland.tv>, for information on Toronto Dance Theatre, see <www.tdt.org>.
- 2 As one reviewer of the dance show says of House: "He talks about the "cool" surface of the large framed screen and the "hot" immediacy of the live dancing." Philip Szporer, "Timecode Break: Pretty Fabulous," *Hour* (Montreal), (12 April 2007).
- 3 Glenn Sumi, "Moving to Pictures: Toronto Dance Theatre's *Timecode Break* Incorporates Dance and Video," *Now* (Toronto), (26 October 2006).
- 4 *Scouts* has screened at numerous festivals and won the Rex Tasker award for best documentary at the 2007 Atlantic Film Festival. For info on the film see: <http://magpiemd.tripod.com>, follow the links to a selection of poem performances and to John Stiles's blog.
- 5 E-mail correspondence with John D. Scott, 10 January 2008.



John Stiles

TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

And Along Come Tourists; The Counterfeiters

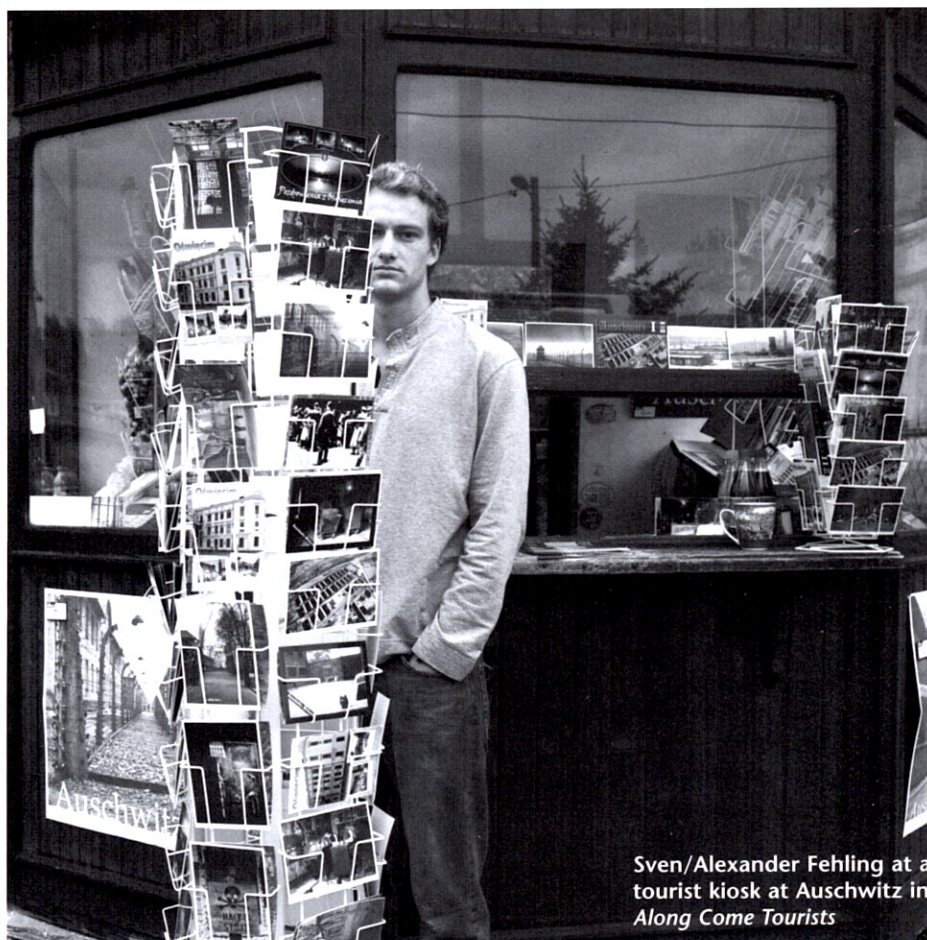
FLORENCE JACOBOWITZ

Two intelligent films screened at TIFF 2007 approach history through the conventions of narrative film. One, a German production directed by Robert Thalheim *And Along Come Tourists*, poses the problem of remembering history through a contemporary story about a young man from Berlin who has been assigned to work at the museum on the site of Auschwitz, as part of his civil service requirements. *The Counterfeiters*, an Austrian production directed by Stefan Ruzowitzky, dramatizes an historical episode entitled Operation Bernhard, wherein a select group of Jewish concentration camp prisoners were assembled in Sachsenhausen and forced to produce counterfeit British pounds and American dollars. The Nazis plotted to use the money to replace their depleted funds and flood the Allied markets with this cash in order to weaken and defeat their enemies in the latter stages of the war.

Spielberg's *Schindler's List* was a watershed film that ignited much debate about the problems of representing history through the medium of mainstream cinema. Do generic conventions, character identification, the demands of narrative resolution and the promise of pleasure and entertainment compromise historical authenticity? Can the experience of incarceration in a concentration camp, one that arguably challenges the limits of not only representation but imagination, be recreated on a set with actors? Claude Lanzmann,

for example, renounces both the use of fictional dramatization as well as archival footage, opting instead to recreate history in the present in his monumental film *Shoah*. The difficulty of finding appropriate and meaningful ways to evoke memory, respect the truth of an event and keep it relevant to future generations remains a challenge. *And Along Come Tourists* centres itself directly on this problem. What is the meaning of Auschwitz today? How does one address this history, talk about it, and teach it with the urgency it deserves? The German title, *Am Ende Kommen Touristen*, more accurately conveys the

meaning that ultimately tourists come. Auschwitz today is a curiosity, a tourist site that is beyond comprehension, even beyond believability and the museum's reverential but schematic and reductive approach to history, summed up in the post-tour discussion where students are asked to choose the most affecting exhibit, fails to make it vital to the young visitors obliged to come on a school outing. Krzeminski/Ryszard Ronczewski, a survivor of the camp who has remained at the site to act as a witness to the events that took place in Auschwitz, sums up the problem of communication with the young people whom he



Sven/Alexander Fehling at a tourist kiosk at Auschwitz in *Along Come Tourists*

meets by claiming that he cannot offer what *Schindler's List* does.

The Counterfeiters is an absorbing drama that raises some very important issues relevant to a contemporary world tilted towards conflagration. In the midst of a disaster does one act to protect oneself and survive, which is what the hero Sally/Karl Markovics does (even if it means collaborating with the enemy) or sacrifice one's life for a greater good, for principles and ideals, as advocated by the ideologue Burger/August Diehl? This is a quandary that has its generic antecedents in the 'commitment' film of the forties, and in many ways, *The Counterfeiters* draws from this genre. Interestingly, the existential question of how to behave ethically in the midst of a catastrophe is in the current zeitgeist, and is raised in another recent Austrian film, Michael Haneke's *le temps du loup/ The Time of the Wolf* which is set in a contemporary world but evokes at times, what has been termed the 'concentrationary universe'. His film is about a family trying to survive in the aftermath of a disaster which has created a shortage of fuel, electricity and water. Haneke's project is very different (it is a fiction and not based on any actual event) but he in no way attempts to entertain or assuage his audience, which may in part account for the film's lack of popular appeal. Haneke pointedly undermines the expectations of the traditional narrative; instead of a hero figure, identification slowly shifts from the parents (the father is killed shockingly in the opening scene) to the children (who are the least empowered). Haneke avoids the problem of compromising the subject to make it agreeable to the demands of narrative art that entertains by ordering disorder or finding an uplifting ending as does *Schindler's List* and *The Counterfeiters*. The director, Ruzowitzky is aware of this dilemma. In the film's press kit he states:

For a present-day audience, an angry "That's how it was!" is no longer enough. We have to talk about the Holocaust and have a moral obligation to do so in a way that reaches as many viewers as possible. So, yes, a film

about the Holocaust should be exciting and entertaining in the best sense of the word. And *The Counterfeiters* is also an entertaining film. But I would also like to say that I would never have dared to depict the everyday horror of a 'normal' concentration camp.

Here the director is claiming to want it all—respect the difficulty of depicting ordinary life in the camps (the film mostly avoids this by focusing on the special block set up for the counterfeiters which enjoyed more privileges and was thus anomalous to life in Sachsenhausen) while delivering a film that is "exciting and entertaining", and provides a happy ending, which is what *The Counterfeiters* does.

Like *Schindler's List*, *The Counterfeiters* is centred on a suave antihero, a character on the edges of society. Salomon Sorowitsch, 'Sally', is based on a person who existed (Salomon Smolianoff) but he is also rooted in myth. He lives for the moment and can be compared to a Bogart character from *To Have and Have Not* or *Casablanca*. One can almost expect him to utter one of Bogart's lines. What are his sympathies? "Minding my own business". Sally's background is not quite legitimate (we see him in a Weimar bar frequented by the criminal world of Berlin); he is successful with women (his one mistake that results in his arrest is lingering with a beautiful woman until morning) and is a pragmatic survivor. There is a deliberate mysteriousness that envelops the character. The film begins with Sally arriving at an elegant hotel in Monte Carlo still dressed in his shabby camp survivor clothing. His cool, measured actions and demeanor, and his suitcase full of cash precede the flashback structure that explains where Sally has been. It assures the audience that the hero not only survives but remains intact. Sally's night of gambling ends with him in bed with a woman (a recurring motif) and her notice of the number tattooed on his arm begins the flashback. The first camp Sally is sent to after his arrest is Mauthausen and he establishes his hero cachet by confronting a brutal

SS guard(or 'kapo') whom a fellow prisoner has advised him to avoid, and ends up protecting himself by using his artistic skills to paint heroic murals of the Nazi SS in the camp. When Sally is transferred to Sachsenhausen he meets the officer who initially arrested him in Berlin, Herzog/Devid Striesow, who now is a *kommandant* of the camp, in charge of the counterfeiting workshop. Herzog and Sally develop a symbiotic relationship where each needs the other for their individual ends, Sally to survive in a degree of comfort and security and Herzog to ensure that his counterfeit monies are produced. The group is privileged to actual beds with linens, the men are relatively well fed, allowed to listen to music while they work and are occasionally rewarded with soirees or the gift of a ping pong table; the reality of Sachsenhausen is distilled into screams or shots heard off screen, outside the barracks. The cruelties of the Nazis intrude through the second in command, but overall the sense is that a degree of order and safety can be maintained under Sally's leadership and skills at mediation. Sally is challenged by Burger, a Communist who is principled and refuses to co-opt and comply in exchange for his safety. His argument, that it is immoral to abet the Nazis through the production of currency, is undermined by his stridency and his questionable motives—his wife is incarcerated in Auschwitz and Burger's option to die for a cause may, in part, be fuelled by despair. Sally resists Burger's demands and tries to mediate between Burger's sabotaging the production and Herzog's impatience. Ultimately, Sally does the right thing and, like a Bogart hero, his actions are more a result of personal commitment to an individual as opposed to a cause. It is after his protégé/friend Kolya is shot, and terms of an agreement he thought he had made with Herzog have been broken, that Sally begins to change. When the counterfeit workers are liberated they are confronted and threatened by a group of starving camp inmates who have not been as privileged. They are, from Sally and his co-workers' point of view and thus from the audience's,

completely unknowable. The film ends with Sally, back in the present, in the casino dressed in evening wear. Sally spends the night winning at the gambling tables and then returns his winnings by intentionally losing. The house acknowledges this and thanks him with a bottle of champagne and Sally retires with his beautiful companion and dances with her on the beach. The final shot is intentionally stylized, as a happy ending.

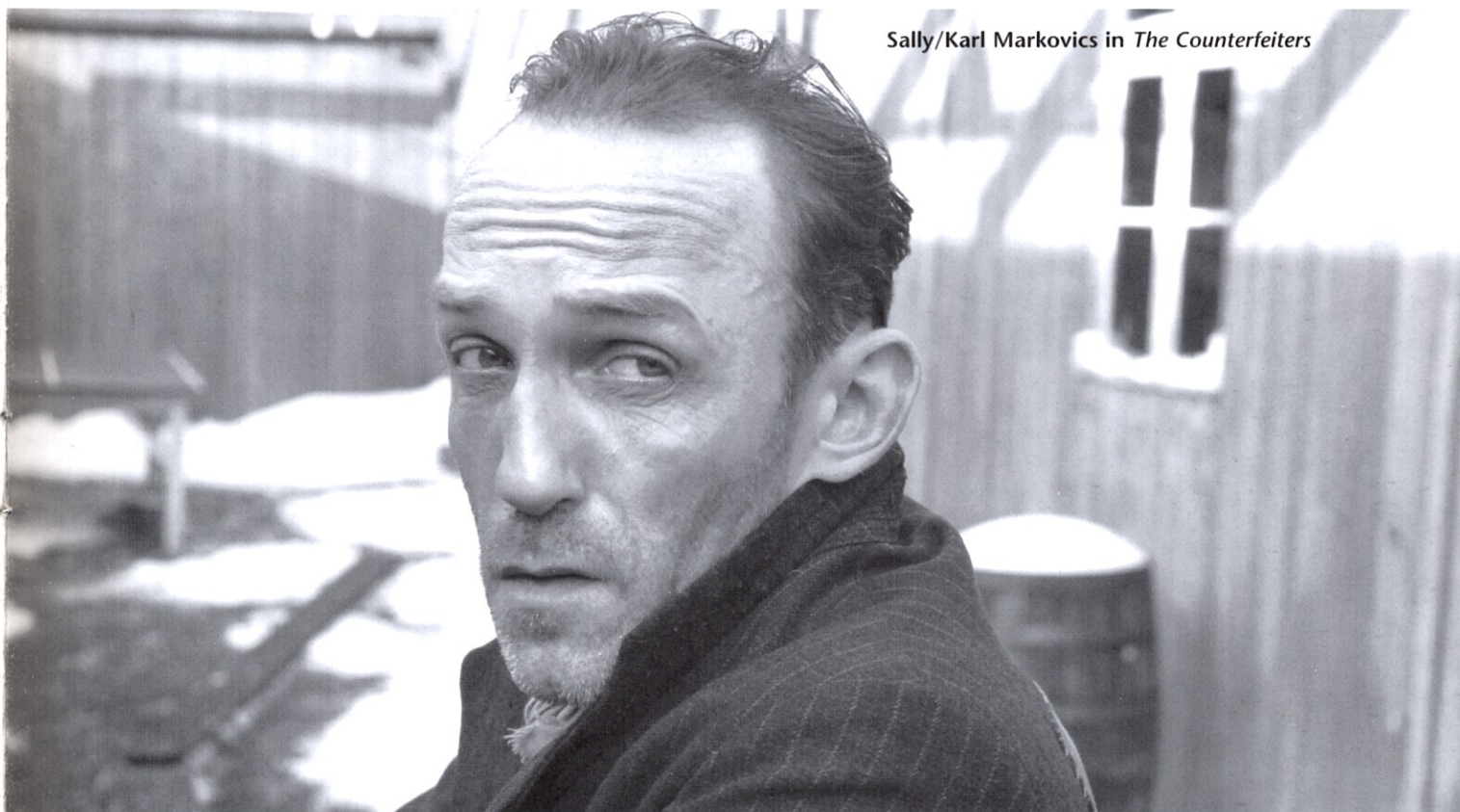
The Counterfeiters is blessed with a very strong cast, particularly in the performances of Sally, Burger and the young artist Kolya. It is, as the director intended, "exciting and entertaining" and intelligently directed, but it does tend to empty out history and replace it with myth in the process. Camp life was perhaps not so bad, Herzog the *kommandant* was not so bad, Sally bears no scars, and the film creates a hero who is impervious to disaster.

And *Along Come Tourists* uses its young protagonist to think about the meaning of Auschwitz in the present, instead of using Auschwitz as a backdrop to a story about a young

German's difficulties acclimatizing to the civil service duties assigned him in Poland. The relationships that develop are tentative, as is the ending. Sven/ Alexander Fehling doesn't achieve much concretely; instead, the character is used to observe and reflect upon the issues the film raises regarding the problem of conservation and memorialization.

The narrative begins with the arrival of Sven, a German student who has come to volunteer at the museum at Auschwitz. Except for a young translator/tour guide named Ania/ Barbara Wysocka whom he meets, no one is particularly friendly or interested in his arrival in the town and some, like Ania's brother, are overtly hostile to a German in Poland. The director of the museum and youth centre seems almost annoyed to be saddled with Sven and neglects to find him suitable accommodations or work. He gives him the job of assisting, but more precisely shadowing, Krzeminski, an elderly survivor of the camps who lives and works on the premises and assigns Sven to share his flat. Krzeminski's job is

repairing the suitcases that are the remnants of the millions who were killed at the camp. Krzeminski is irritated by Sven's appointment to watch over him and resents Sven's presence as it makes him feel increasingly useless and a burden, as if he too has been reduced to a relic that needs tending. Krzeminski's approach to conservation clashes with that of the younger academics who believe in conserving the suitcases in their state of disrepair, freezing them in time for the didactic purposes of the museum display. Krzeminski's repairs are a form of renewal that extends beyond preservation. His motives are more complex—it is almost a duty to their former owners as the suitcases are the remaining evidence of their lives. Krzeminski's commitment is to those individuals and a culture that once existed while the conservationists' obligation is to the object. He is later barred from renewing the suitcases and Sven, realizing how misdirected this is, and protective of Krzeminski's feelings, steals some for him to work on in protest. When Krzeminski's sister discusses his leav-



Sally/Karl Markovics in *The Counterfeiters*

ing the site and living with her his reluctance to do so seems linked to the sense of obligation he has which is, for him, integral to the place of Auschwitz.

Krzeminski also attends question and answer sessions with student visitors but they are uninterested and at times suspicious and almost skeptical of his testimony as an eyewitness. One asks him "What did you eat?" and he answers, "Everything and nothing". One asks to see the prisoner I.D. number tattooed on his arm and then wonders why it has faded. "I haven't had it renewed recently", Krzeminski answers sardonically as the comment implies disbelief. They can't communicate with him as his experience is too strange and beyond comprehension and they question the veracity of his testimony. The scene of their discussion takes place on the site of Auschwitz in the presence of an eyewitness, yet it is still insufficient and unconvincing to the young reluctant visitors, and thus raises the problem of keeping collective memory alive. The witnesses and the evidence are fading as is the public regard for the event.

When a German chemical company decides to build a chemical plant in Oswiecim, the town of Auschwitz, they are obliged to address the terrible irony of Germans planning to produce chemicals on the site of the camp where chemicals were integral to the killing process; they compensate for this by dedicating a small memorial before building begins and invite Krzeminski to speak. Krzeminski's presentation continues beyond what the officials deem appropriate and he is hurried off stage. The offer was to acknowledge the past in a cursory way without actually talking about it. The casting of Lena Stolze of *The Nasty Girl* as the rude factory representative is significant given her acclaimed role in the film as a woman who forces memory onto a town reluctant to address the past.

Sven's relationship with Ania (he eventually rents a space in her flat) allows him a closer glimpse of the lives of young people of his generation in the Polish town. They are already second generation post-war,

and they seem angry, bored or detached from the inherited history of their town. Ania feels trapped and is most anxious to leave when the first opportunity to do so arises and start a life elsewhere. Her brother and his friends are part of an industrial rock band whose music, and their time spent getting drunk, expresses the nihilistic rage and apathy of their peers. Ania is angered and offended when Sven confronts her about her detachment from the history of her surroundings. She takes Sven on a picnic and bicycle ride through Monowitz, the site of the satellite camps that were part of the Auschwitz complex, and her seeming ability to enjoy a picnic on these grounds surprises Sven and moves him to question her relationship to the history of the place. She counters by asking Sven of his identity as a German and his obligation to these events. Sven never does feel comfortable or a part of the youth of Oswiecim and only finally attempts to join them in their drinking/ dancing/ music rites when he feels overwhelmed and lonely; He tries participating when he feels beaten towards the end of the film. His only friend Ania is leaving, Krzeminski has been unofficially retired from his duties at the museum and his role as witness is not valued; Sven learns that one cannot easily safeguard history and force others to appreciate its importance, particularly when they feel disconnected and unwilling to struggle with its meaning. He realizes that a tourist site is not the same as a memorial site, and he despairs about this. Although Sven has packed to leave he decides finally to stay on at the museum. It is a statement about his commitment to trying to use the didactic potential of the museum to engage students and visitors and encourage them to think about the continuing relevance of Auschwitz.

And Along Come Tourists is a remarkably intelligent, however modest, film that raises profound questions about collective memory and history. Given the rise of right-wing populist parties in Austria, Poland and elsewhere in Europe and around the world, the opportunity to use art to address this history seems particularly crucial.

Les Bons Films

A Girl Cut in Two and *Angel*

RICHARD LIPPE

Seeing Claude Chabrol's *A Girl Cut in Two* and François Ozon's *Angel* at the 2007 TIFF was a reminder that there are few strong and intelligent films about women in the contemporary cinema. Arguably, despite the fact that feminism wasn't a political issue at the time, the classical cinema was more conducive to a progressive depiction of women. In addition to there being a sizeable female audience for the melodrama and the women's film, the studios provided their contract actresses with vehicles that capitalized on star image, presence and persona. Although the use of stereotypes was commonplace, these actresses were more frequently than not given the opportunity to play characters that were multi-dimensional, embodied contradictions, and were unpredictable in their responses to experiences in both their personal and/or professional lives.

In the present day, most young actresses don't want to play a character that isn't simultaneously gender conscious and non-threatening, appealing to both the male and female viewer. Ironically, for the most part, the contemporary actress has less range in image and opportunity of expression than did her predecessors.

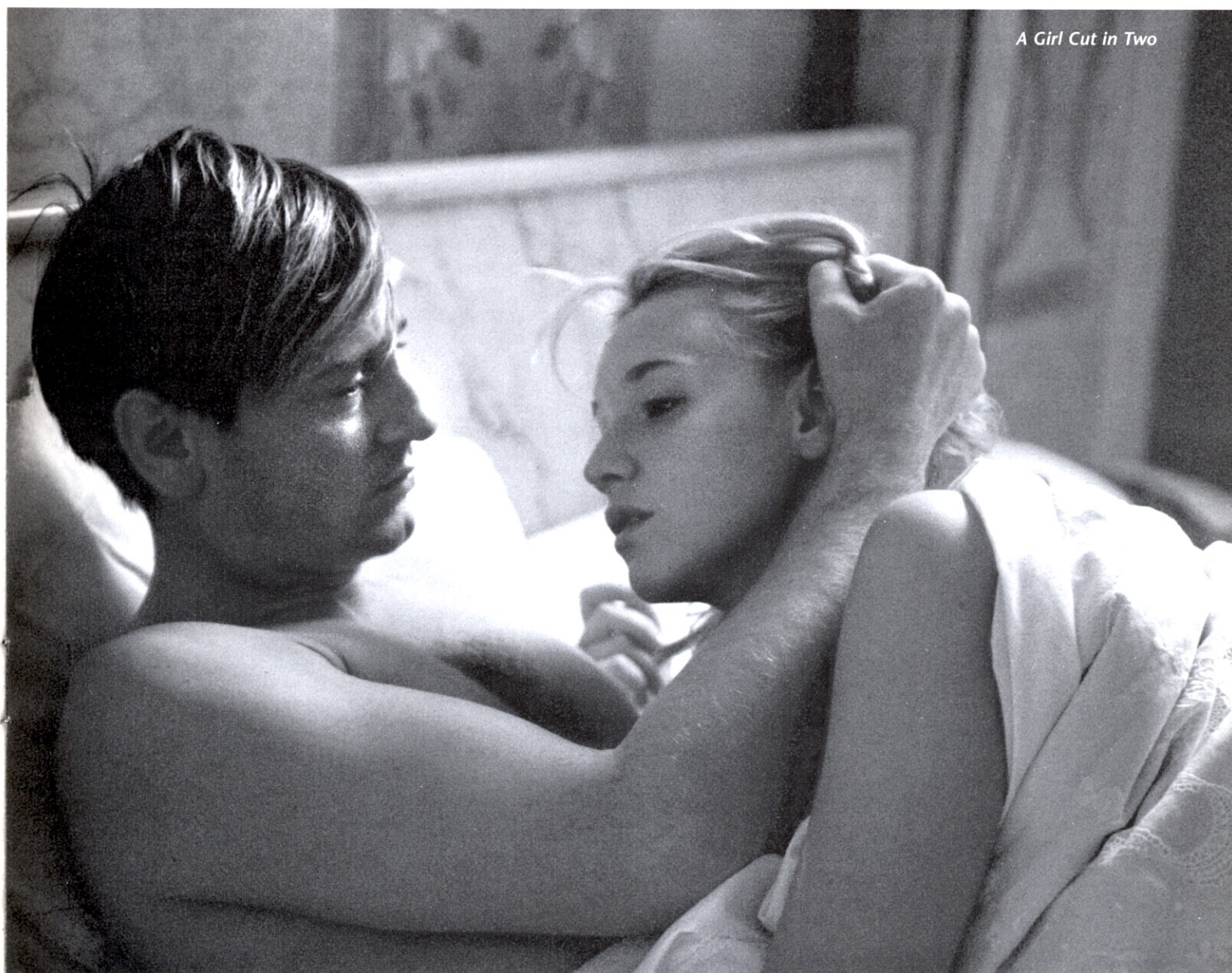
Chabrol isn't a director who has been identified with having a strong interest in women's identities within patriarchal-capitalist-bourgeois society. Yet from *Les Bonnes Femmes* (1960) onwards, he has often provided his actresses with roles that, in addition to giving them the opportunity to demonstrate and/or develop their performance skills, deal with women under pressure because of their placement in the social world. While it is the case that Chabrol's films tend to express empathy with (and, at times, sympathy for) both his female and male characters, the director's most notable and rewarding

collaborations with actors have been with Stéphane Audran and Isabelle Huppert. Audran, who was married to Chabrol during the greater part of their working relationship, wasn't from the beginning of the collaboration treated as his muse (although, interestingly, their first film together was *Les Bonnes Femmes*) or a presence he was moulding into an iconic image. She invariably played women, including bourgeois wife/mother figures, who are intelligent, aware and capable of making difficult deci-

sions when pressured to do so. More recently, Isabelle Huppert, an almost defiantly independent and gender conscious actor who has appeared to date in six Chabrol films, has found him to be her most sensitive director. Arguably, her work with Chabrol is at present the high point of her career. More recently, Isabelle Huppert, an almost defiantly independent and gender conscious actor who has appeared to date in six Chabrol films, has found him to be her most sensitive director.

A Girl Cut in Two

A Girl Cut in Two, which Chabrol co-scripted with Cécile Maistre, is based on a notorious real-life incident that occurred in New York City in 1906. Stanford White, a famous architect, was killed by a mentally unstable millionaire, Harry K. Thaw; the latter, soon after marrying a young model, Evelyn Nesbit, shot White on the grounds that he, Nesbit's former lover, had defiled her. Their story was dramatized in Richard Fleischer's *The Girl in the Red Velvet*



A Girl Cut in Two

Swing (1955), a favourite of the late '50s *Cahiers du Cinema* critics. Chabrol and Maistre set their version of the story in contemporary Lyon and the three major protagonists respectively are: Charles Saint-Denis (François Berléand), an aging but attractive high profile writer; Paul Gaudens (Benoit Magimet), the schizophrenic young son of a wealthy and prestigious family; Gabrielle Deneige (Ludivine Sagnier), a young middle class woman who has a budding television career working nightly, as the film begins, as a weather girl. *A Girl Cut in Two* follows faithfully the narrative trajectory of *The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing* with Gabrielle marrying Paul when Charles refuses to offer her more than being his mistress and, after the marriage, having Paul become obsessed with Charles's

corruption of his wife to the point that he kills him in an act of passion.

In a brief Chabrol interview distributed with the press screening of the film, he says of the original event on which the film is based "...this news story is more easily imaginable—and therefore transposable—today then during the era in which it happened." In the Chabrol-Maistre version the story serves as a means to critically address the contemporary state of television and the publishing business. Television, in particular, is shown to be promoting an illusion of reality—a world of mindlessness that is packaged to please the eye and induce fantasy. When Gabrielle proves herself to be a viewer attraction as the weather girl, she is given her own interview show entitled "The Icing on the Cake" which seemingly

consists of interviews that deal with the interviewees telling racy and/or humorous stories about celebrities they have encountered. On the air, Gabrielle, wearing a red bustier, doesn't do more than smile seductively and encourage the interviewee to tell his Woody Allen story. Chabrol's point about television, as he says in the interview, is that the false world it promotes has become mirrored in everyday life.

And in *A Girl Cut in Two*, Charles and Paul live out a fantasy-like existence, inhabiting a world that includes privilege, indulgence, and fulfilment.

A Girl Cut in Two presents a bleak portrait of heterosexual relations. The film depicts a degree of female empowerment. For example, Charles's agent/friend,

Angel



Capucine (Mathilda May), is seen initially dealing with Charles as an equal and being frank about his (and her own) personal life. But, as the film progresses, it becomes evident that Capucine succeeds as well as she does because she understands and accepts the man's world around her. It's a world of sexual conquest, prowess and the maintaining of an upper hand in all relationships.

Charles, who has a reputation as a womanizer, also has a wife who seems to be unfailingly 'understanding' about his lifestyle. In turn, he has made a commitment to her that, as Gabrielle finds, he won't break. Charles defends the marriage on the grounds that his wife is so good to him; in other words, she provides him with an unqualified acceptance and the security it brings. His wife, in a fleeting moment of candour, when asked during a luncheon with Charles and Capucine what she would most like in another life, replies "a pair of balls."

In contrast to the women closest to Charles, there are the mothers of Gabrielle and Paul. Gabrielle's mother, who manages a bookstore, is aware of Charles's reputation and warns her daughter, when hearing from her that she loves Charles, that he will never leave his wife. While she is right about Charles, she is also powerless. Paul's mother gives the impression of helplessness when she is around her son but, when he announces his intention to marry Gabrielle, she reveals her true self—a ruthless matriarch willing to do whatever she must to protect the family name and fortune. Employing cold calculation to safeguard her haut bourgeois standing, she turns out to be the film's most villainous character.

Gabrielle Deneige, as the name suggests, is, despite her direct connections to the media, an innocent. In addition to her physical attributes, beauty and charm, Gabrielle's appeal is that she hasn't been corrupted. Her innocence is what in great part makes her desirable to both Charles and Paul. For Charles, Gabrielle is a challenge—a young woman to be initiated into the world of unbridled sexuality. After bedding her, Charles gives her as a gift a rare 1937 edition

of *The Woman and the Puppet* and then shows her erotic drawings that he finds titillating. On Gabrielle's birthday, he takes her to a private club at which he offers her to his friends for the purposes of sexual pleasure. Whereas Charles pursues Gabrielle with notions of sexual depravity, Paul's interest in her is that she isn't, like the other young women he knows, interested in seducing him because of his wealth and/or local celebrity status. (He also knows of Charles and his interest in her and considers him his rival for her.) Paul projects on to Gabrielle an image of an ideal woman (previous to the marriage he gives her a figurine shaped as an angel), someone he can love.

After marrying her, Paul turns on Gabrielle when, making love, he realizes that she is more knowledgeable about what is sexually pleasurable than he wants her to be. He cannot sustain the illusion of her innocence (which is as important to him, if not more so, than is Gabrielle herself) and, in anger, threatens to kill her and himself. As with Charles, Gabrielle refuses to accept the guilt Paul attempts to impose on her; but, unlike Charles, Paul isn't willing to give her up. In *A Girl Cut in Two* Gabrielle is involved with two men who construct mutually exclusive images of her. Chabrol, in the interview, points out that Charles asks, at one point in the film, whether society is heading towards 'puritanism or decadence.'

Charles is the most aware of the film's lead protagonists. He is truthful about what he wants and knows his limits and, despite his treatment of Gabrielle, isn't portrayed as a negative figure. After Paul kills him, Gabrielle becomes the centre of a media-hyped scandal in which she, because of her honesty, becomes a notorious figure. As in *The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing*, Gabrielle finds herself back eventually in the world of illusionism; she takes a job with her uncle, a magician, becoming the beautiful young woman he saws in half.

A Girl Cut in Two begins with a credit sequence that features images as seen by a person behind the wheel of a car driving (it turns out to be Capucine on her way to Charles's

country house) while listening to an aria from *Turandot*. The images are suffused with a red filter and (combined with the music) suggest an impending dramatic event. (As the story begins nothing of consequence happens and Chabrol takes a matter-of-fact approach to the entire narrative.) Whereas the film begins with opera, it ends with a magician's trick, a very different longstanding form of theatre. Gabrielle, as she is about to be sawed in half, is seen in a close up with tears in her eyes; but then there is directly a cut to a shot of the live Gabrielle, standing on the stage and smiling as the audience applauds. The shot is followed with a freeze frame on Gabrielle's smiling face, providing the film with an unexpectedly (and, for Chabrol, an uncharacteristic) upbeat ending. Gabrielle survives being sawed in half and she survives her off stage experience that threatened to destroy her.

In *A Girl Cut in Two*, Chabrol accepts neither decadence nor puritanism. Like his heroine, he is involved with illusionism; but the cinema, in contrast to television which promotes the notion of offering 'reality', has been, from the beginning, connected to 'magic' and spectacle. As so often in the past, Chabrol, with this film, is working with a strong actress. Ludivine Sagnier (also in Ozon's *Eight Women* and *The Swimming Pool*), is ideally cast as Gabrielle, making her sexy, vulnerable and a person of integrity even when she is being compromised by the two men competing for her.

Angel

François Ozon's *Angel* is based on a 1957 novel of the same name by British writer Elizabeth Taylor. Set in Edwardian England, *Angel* tells the story of Angel Devereil (Romola Garai) who is first encountered as a teenage schoolgirl in the small town of Norley. Angel's female classmates are snobbish and she is disdainful of her mother's commonplace life as a grocer. Angel devotes her energies to writing romantic novels that feature heroines who lead exciting lives, finding love and happiness. She sends one of her novels to a London based publisher, Theo (Sam Neill), who

expresses interest in the book. When interviewed, Angel rejects the manuscript changes Theo wants; but, impressed by her self-confidence, he decides to publish it as written. The novel is commercially a huge success and Angel overnight becomes a celebrity.

Angel becomes rich and buys Paradise House, a once grand place in Norley that she has long admired from afar. Soon after, she is introduced to Nora (Lucy Russell) and Esme (Michael Fassbender), a sister and brother who are connected to the local aristocracy. Nora, later revealed to be a repressed lesbian, is enthralled with both Angel and her novels and offers herself as a secretary/companion. In contrast, Esme, an aspiring painter whose works express an extremely bleak outlook on life, is less enchanted with Angel. Disregarding their differing sensibilities, Angel, taken by Esme's good looks and intrigued by his defiant personality, begins to court him. Eventually, he marries her and moves in to Paradise House. The relationship begins to unravel when Esme, against Angel's wishes, enlists in WWI. Esme, who is crippled in the war, returns in a state of severe depression to reveal to Angel that the woman he loved for years abandoned him while he was gone. The war not only put an end to Angel's fantasy of Esme as the love of her life but, professionally, it has altered the public's taste and her books no longer sell.

Critics have suggested that Angel is comparable to Scarlett O'Hara in that both characters are self-centred and refuse to accept the reality of their lives. But unlike the aristocratic Scarlett, Angel doesn't possess social skills or a sense of decorum. For instance, Angel, when invited to dinner to meet Theo's wife, Hermione (Charlotte Rampling), displays an almost shocking lack of sensitivity to her hostess. And Angel doesn't rely on femininity, as does Scarlett, to get what she wants from men.

Angel, in fact, doesn't conform to the traditional heroine found in the Hollywood melodrama in that she isn't a victim. While becoming, by the end of the film, a tragic figure, it is not because Angel has been

defeated in her attempts at self-realization. Rather, her downfall occurs when she fully realizes that she hasn't control over the direction her life takes.

Angel isn't basically a sympathetic figure. Ozon has her behave, at times, in a spoiled child-like manner; and more daringly, given the genre, he occasionally makes her simply ridiculous. For instance, when her mother dies, Angel, in talking to a reporter, tells him that she was a classical pianist, a pure invention on her part. By using humour to deal with Angel's excessive flights of imagination, Ozon provides the viewer with some distance from the character. The strategy is risky as evident in the review *Variety* gives the film. The reviewer, while acknowledging the film's impressive production values, writes *Angel* off as a failure chiefly because he finds the heroine a totally unappealing figure. In contrast, I find Ozon's approach to the character and the genre bold, imaginative and intelligent. Ozon is never condescending to or cynical about his heroine and he doesn't judge her harshly because of her refusal to accept the world as it is. In a way, Angel is, despite the differences between the characters, a variant of Minnelli's *Madame Bovary*. Angel, too, wants her life and the world itself to be a beautiful place.

By having Angel use writing as her means to disengage from reality, the film raises the relationship of the artist and art to the real world. On the one hand, Angel is, as the film makes clear, not an artist in that her work doesn't transcend sentimental wish-fulfilment. Yet Angel has imagination and an innate ability to use language to communicate her ideas and a vision; additionally, she genuinely believes in what she writes. Arguably, Angel's potential as a creative person can't be fully realized because her work is so closely connected to her personal needs. In her novels, she only gives expression to what she has been led through social conditioning (and the ideological values underpinning it) to believe will make her happy. Ozon's attitude towards Angel is perhaps best expressed by Hermione. Some

years after her initial meeting with Angel, she tells Theo that while she stills finds her work inferior, she has come to respect Angel because of her strength and commitment. (In *The Swimming Pool*, Charlotte Rampling plays a writer who, in her personal life, blurs the line between fiction and reality; and, in *Under the Sand*, her character, while not a writer, teaches literature and is particularly fond of the writings of Virginia Woolf. When her husband dies, she refuses to accept his death, keeping him alive in her imagination and, eventually, fantasizes his existence in her daily life.)

As mentioned earlier, the turning point in Angel's life is WW I and its aftermath. Her relationship with Esme ends with his suicide, her mother dies and, her public having abandoned her, she sees herself without a future. Angel begins to become indifferent to her surroundings (she allows Paradise House and its grounds to deteriorate) and her health. She lives as if she were alone although Nora remains with her. Angel's vulnerability is most unexpectedly and touchingly shown in her final encounter with Nora. Angel, on her deathbed, confides in her, asking Nora for reassurance. Suddenly, Angel, stepping outside her vision of what her life and life itself should be, fully recognizes Nora's love for her; she kisses her and says that Nora is the only person who has ever loved her. It is an extraordinary moment and followed up with another as Angel, in order to die as she lived, announces "I am Angel Deverell."

In the context of the melodrama, Angel's death scene is highly unconventional. Angel, by asserting her identity as a final gesture, reaffirms her self-definition and takes responsibility for it. She becomes a genuine heroine, a woman who celebrates her strength and accomplishments (in contrast to the heroines in her books who achieved an identity through the love of a hero figure); and, in acknowledging and accepting Nora's love, Angel affirms the power and beauty of one woman's love for another.

Angel opens with a winter scene that ends with a teenaged Angel standing at the barred gates of

Paradise House, longingly admiring it. The film concludes with another Paradise House winter scene. Theo and Nora, having visited Angel's grave, are leaving the grounds. Nora mentions that the meagre response to Angel's death was disappointing. As they continue to walk, the camera cranes back and they become small figures in the landscape. The scene's elegiac tone provides *Angel* with its final commentary, the temporality of human existence. *Angel* is a fitting companion piece to *Under the Sand*, being an equally disturbing and emotionally rich film.

In an interview about the film on his official website, Ozon mentions that he wanted *Angel*, his first period work, to be in the tradition of the 1930s and 1940s melodramas; Denis Lenoir, the film's director of photography, (also interviewed) says that the visual references Ozon established before he began working on the project were '...Minnelli, Powell and Sirk, among others.' (Like the other interviewees, Lenoir mentions Ozon's total involvement in every aspect of the film's conception.) As *Angel* demonstrates, Ozon not only admires the classical cinema's great melodramatists, but also understands their integration of content and style. *Angel* is a beautifully realized piece of mise-en-scene filmmaking. It also contains a remarkable performance by Romola Garai who is brave enough to play a leading part that doesn't solicit viewer empathy.

It is instructive to compare *Angel* to Joe Wright's *Atonement* (also screened in the TIFF.) In addition to both films being period melodramas set in England, *Atonement* prominently features an imaginative teenage girl who aspires to be a writer (and who, as an adult woman, is played by Romola Garai.) *Atonement* is the opposite of *Angel* in that Wright takes a literal approach to the material and visually produces a series of images that do no more than illustrate the story. *Atonement*, despite its charged emotional content, seems impersonal and ultimately insignificant, although it tries hard to be a film that makes a meaningful statement about personal relations and the uncontrollable impact of social forces.

Random Thoughts On and Around the Toronto Film Festival

ROBIN WOOD

I have decided that the festival itself is 'no country for old men'. The constant rush and pressure, the line-ups in which one waits for an hour to get a seat, the rush from theatre to theatre scattered over the city. I have learnt one lesson: avoid all the 'major works'. Easy to say in my position, where I don't have a deadline to worry about. Next year, if I'm still around, I shall choose entirely unknown films that no one has to line up for, and catch up with the big ones when they open commercially. Meanwhile...

'America, America':

1. The Death of the Old West

Oscar Wilde famously remarked that the United States is the only country that went directly from barbarism to decadence without any intervening period of civilization. An extreme reaction, perhaps, but with a certain credibility. It has long seemed to me that America's contribution to world culture lies not in its music (I can raise little excitement over Barber and Copland) or its literature (Henry James had to move to England to write his best novels) but in its cinema, and especially its period of glory roughly between the coming of sound and the coming of television: the heyday of Hawks, Ford and McCarey.

But Ford made only two films that constructed a positive view of the new culture (*Drums Along the Mohawk*, which is also the bloodiest and most violent of all his westerns, and *My Darling Clementine*, with its celebrated unroofed church sequence that has no sequel subsequently in his work); he withdrew into the cavalry, defenders of a culture we never really get to see. Hawks' comedies are primarily dedicated to reducing the culture to ruins, and his adventure films are set as far from America as one could reasonably

get. The heroes of *Rio Bravo*, to my mind the finest of all westerns, show remarkably little commitment to saving American civilization, which is reduced to a few occasional bystanders in long shot. They act primarily from a kind of primitive existentialism, a commitment to their own code of basic decency. Their enemy, however, is an equally primitive form of corporate capitalism and its paid gunmen. McCarey, alas, had his Catholicism to support him, but his best work (from *Ruggles of Red Gap* to *Rally Round the Flag, Boys*, via *Make Way for Tomorrow*) manifests a steady and ultimately devastating disillusionment with his country, *Rally* actually culminating in a clear wish-fulfilment fantasy that it had never existed. America's cinematic cultural history similarly culminates in *No Country for Old Men* (Cormac McCarthy's novel and its generally faithful adaptation by the Cohen Brothers).

I've been puzzled by the film's (and book's) reviewers' apparent reluctance to take up the obvious reference to Yeats' poem (*Sailing to Byzantium*) (is it too obvious, perhaps?). The film's savage bitterness is surely summed up in its caustic irony: Yeats's 'no country for old men' is a celebration of youth ('...the young in one another's arms'), energy, and above all fertility ('the salmon falls, the mackerel-crowded seas'), contrasted with the film's world (the West today, with its twin wildernesses of prairie and city), gone sterile, ugly, brutal, meaningless. Its major villain is a kind of human robot who doesn't even appear to enjoy killing his victims—perhaps the ultimate form of alienation. Its hero is an old man who hasn't caught up with the times, remaining obsolete and effectually impotent. Is this the great film it's been acclaimed as by practically every critic? I don't know. Certainly it's coherent and inexorable in its negativity. But it's a sorry state of affairs when negativity should become accepted as the intelligent reaction to the collapse of a culture.

2. The Death of the Family

It's not that big a jump, in today's world, from the alienated cowboy to the alienated family. *Margot at the*

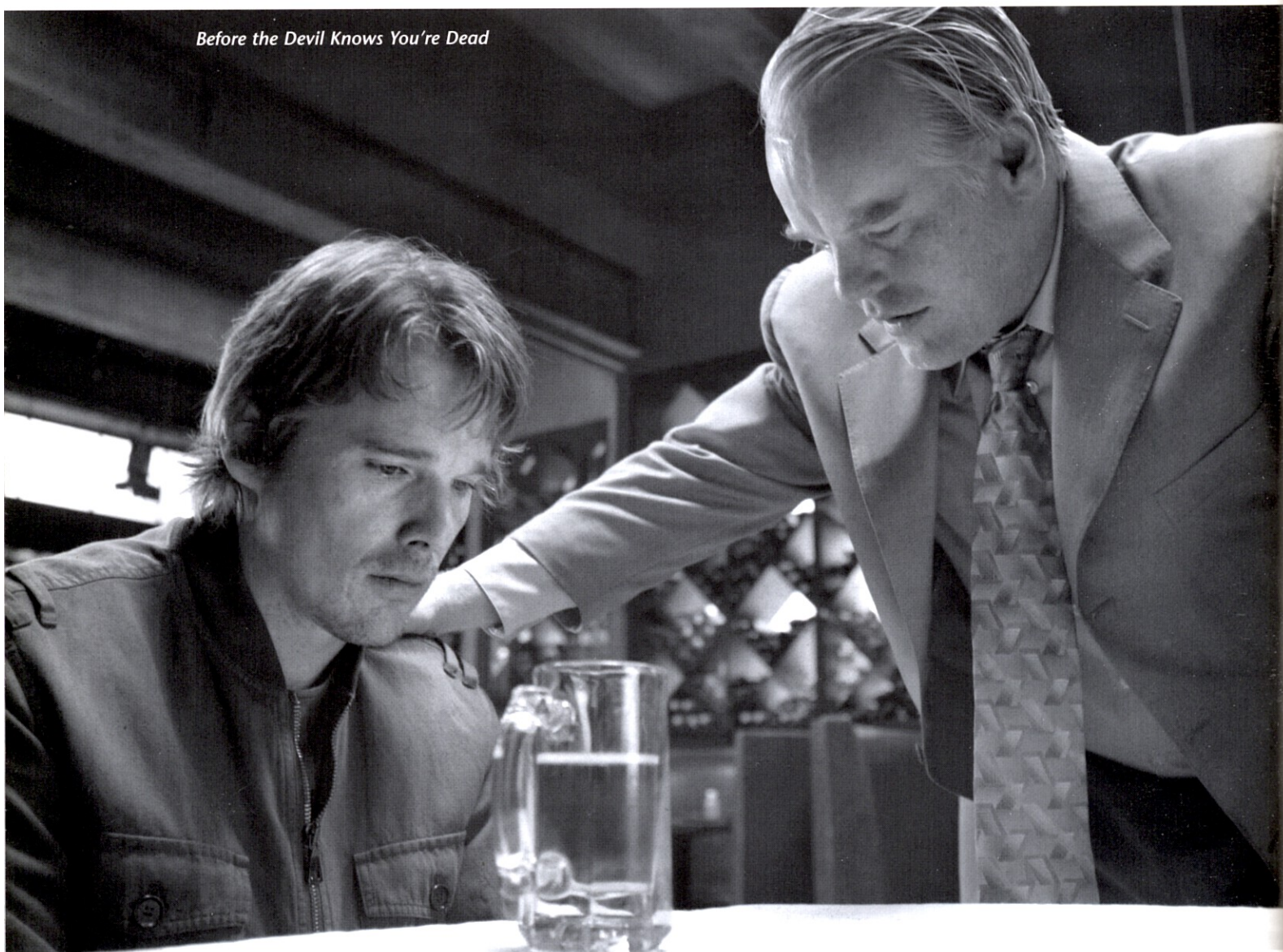
Wedding and Before the Devil Knows You're Dead, are, respectively, a family comedy at which it's impossible to laugh and a family melodrama that verges, by its close, on the horror movie. Like *No Country for Old Men*, both are meticulously acted and directed.

I am an admirer of Gombach's *The Squid and the Whale*, a film he based upon his own family, notably his monstrous father, an academic who outshone most of his fellows for presumption, self-importance and a totally unwarranted assumption of his own infallibility. (Anyone who has spent forty years in academia will recognize the type, caught brilliantly by Jeff Daniels). The film evokes a con-

tinuous discomfort—pain, at times—without losing its mordant sense of humour, its poise. For better or for worse, *Margot at the Wedding* takes the next step into the quagmire of family relationships today, its characters sparing each other as little as the film spares its audience. I don't know whether this was Gombach's intention (I suppose it's conceivable that he found much of the 'comedy' hilarious). The film's thesis lies in its demonstration that 'family relationships' simply don't exist any more except under great strain, full of anger, resentment and hatred—greater, surely, than the always dubious notions of 'family' can sustain. Read, perhaps, 'against the grain',

we might find here a plea for the demolition of the very notion of 'family', demolished, in my opinion, long ago, though it still drags on quite idiotically. Why can we not embrace, and greatly extend, the notion of communal living, in which relationships are never 'perfect' and could be fluid, for children as well as adults? Why are we still so possessive? It seems a leftover from male domination ('MY wife, MY child, MY house', etc.). We would simply have to get rid of all our bourgeois homes, our apartment buildings, and live in communities within which families could flourish if they were successful (very, very few are, in my experience), but in which everyone

Before the Devil Knows You're Dead



(including children) would have the liberty to move about, form multiple relationships... Possessiveness would become the worst crime, but no one's life would have to depend upon the adoration of another person.

First, of course, you would have to solve the problems (immense) of capitalism, but as it is probably going to destroy all life on this planet (this crazy planet, on which no one seems to have complete freedom) in the rather near future, there is not a great deal I can say. (Reader either closes magazine or heaves sigh of relief...or thinks I'm joking. I'm not...). And Gombach's film does, it seems to me, raise these questions in an acute form.

They are answered, surprisingly and shockingly, by Sidney Lumet, balancing the ultimate family comedy with the ultimate family melodrama, *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead*, in which the elder son, indirectly responsible for the death of the mother, is calmly and deliberately executed by his father. It's an extraordinary movie (as, in its own way, is *Margot at the Wedding*), but not one (again like *Margot*) that I would wish to sit through again in the foreseeable future. In each case one feels one has been put through the wringer... unlike

Munyurangabo, which also happens to be the work of an American director, Lee Isaac Chung, who... 'grew up in Kansas and studied biology at Yale University' (Festival Guide).

Munyurangabo is his first feature film, and (I hope) the beginning of a long and prosperous career, although the film has not, apparently, been taken up for release as yet. It came as a breath of fresh air among the stifling and ultimately enervating films mentioned above. Chung's film (made on location in Africa, with non-professional actors) is set in Rwanda a year after the cataclysm. I found it deeply touching, gently and intelligently concerned with restoration and forgiveness. I still can't watch the last ten minutes without crying, and I've seen it now half a dozen times. I hope it won't disappear... But audiences today, in our confused and turbulent times, want punishment, not reconciliation.

No Country for Old Men



My Kid Could Paint That

Is There Anything There?
Marla Painting, Pollock
Painting, and Abstract Art
in the 21st Century

SUSAN MORRISON

Art on Film I: Pollock Painting

Probably the most famous example of an artist filmed in the process of painting an artwork is the brief colour footage of Jackson Pollock shot by Hans Namuth at Pollock's studio (and home) in Springs, Long Island in 1950. Two different moments are extant: the first depicts Pollock out of doors working on an already-in-progress canvas spread out in front of him on a concrete platform. He holds cans of liquid paint and we watch while he walks along the very long but narrow canvas bending over or kneeling to drip the fluid paint where he deems appropriate.¹ The second, more of a complete narrative, documents the entire genesis of a unique work, again done out of doors, on a large plate of glass set upon a wooden trestle, the camera placed underneath shooting upwards through the glass towards the blue sky. In this way, the viewer has privileged access to the actual creative process of the artist; we see Pollock place various bits of coloured plastic, pebbles, wire mesh and string down on the surface of the glass; and then methodically drip skeins of liquid paint on top of them, sealing them down and incorporating them into the artwork. The film ends with Pollock signing and dating a glass plate shot in the same way but notably not the same piece as before: the date is 1951, when the film was finished, not 1950, when the painting was completed.²

These few moments of film hold an iconic place in art history, for they transformed the image of the artist from private individual into public performer. In addition, the very activity of painting abstractly, thus caught by the camera, could be (mis)perceived and hence understood (only) as a choreography, a dance, that is, a

"mindless" physical bodily performance, rather than as a series of decisions consciously (or unconsciously) enacted on a surface. In the public arena, all emphasis was placed on Pollock's unorthodox method (Time magazine's "Jack the Dripper") and tragic life; his context and situated historical importance overshadowed by the romantic mythology that ensued. The art world's "serious artist" reduced to popular culture's "notorious celebrity". Fifty-five years later, a film screened at this year's Toronto International Film festival caught another individual painting on film, thus presenting us with an opportunity to reflect on the cultural ramifications produced when a 4 year old girl is substituted for a 40 year old male.

Art on Film II: Marla Painting

Amir Bar-Lev's film *My Kid Could Paint That* (2007) covers many bases. It is at once a documentary about Marla Olmstead, a four year old girl whose abstract paintings were, and perhaps still are, taken as serious art; the unexpected unfolding of an investigation into the possibility of an art fraud perpetrated by Marla's father, who might be the actual artist or at least the *eminence grise* behind the paintings; a study of what appears to be the perfect all-American young family- beautiful blonde haired mother, handsome father, cute little boy and even cuter little girl- in success and then in crisis; an exposé of the American public's obsession with a) cute little girls and b) abstract art as a fraud perpetrated by the art world on a gullible audience.

Of all these possible paths for discussion and investigation, it's the way in which *My Kid Could Paint That* participates in the on-going conversation surrounding abstract art's reception that is of major interest to me. It is a curious yet seminal fact that this film refuses to answer the question "Is there anything there?" with regards to the value of the art... from the choice of the title (a typical sarcastic response when someone is confronted with an abstract work) to the open ending (we never do find out the "truth" about the paintings' authorship), we are on our own.

My Kid Could Paint That reveals to us a contradictory logic, a classic Freudian "disavowal" wherein the subject can hold two contradictory ideas in their head at the same time ("I know very well but nevertheless..."). On the one hand, it presents a virulent and unashamed attack on abstract art by some of the major players in the film's narrative. Marla's art dealer, Anthony Brunelli, admits to the camera after the scandal has broken and her authorship is in question, that he himself never thought much of abstract art. To him, Marla was "a gift from God" insofar as he could use her to get back at the pretensions of the art world, a kind of "Screw you, art world. I've got something on you" device. Elizabeth Cohen, the journalist who first wrote about Marla in the local Binghamton paper (notably as a human interest story not as an art review), expresses her own feelings on the issue through an emotional reference to her mother's hatred of Pollock's paintings because they made her feel ignorant. And Stuart Simpson, a collector so thrilled with Marla's art that he opened his own gallery (now closed) in Encino California with a 'one-girl-show, disliked abstract art until he saw her paintings. So the general position here is that abstract art is in itself a sham; there is nothing to or in it.

Except that, on the other hand, Marla paints pictures that are abstractions. Those very people who emphatically dismiss abstract art as valueless see no contradiction in accepting as valuable abstractions made by a 4 year old girl. Do they now see something there rather than nothing? Connected inextricably to this conundrum are further issues of "genius" (is she or isn't she?) and authorship (did she or didn't she).

Is Marla a child prodigy? Historically, child prodigies in art, say like Picasso or Salvador Dali, have been considered thus because they could draw realistically at an early age. Marla most emphatically does not paint realistically. All of the ones pictured in the film are abstractions: some of her paintings bear a vague resemblance to early Pollocks from the mid-forties (e.g. *The Moon-Woman Cuts the Circle*, 1943 or *Eyes*



My Kid Could Paint That

in the Heat, 1946), with thick paint “expressively” brushed onto a large canvas; a few are actually dripped, although unlike Pollock’s, on a brightly coloured flat ground with brightly coloured paints (e.g. see *Tornado* or *Darlene’s Bikini* on her promotional website, marlaolmstead.com). The Pollock connection aside (and that’s a big aside), the fact that she paints abstractly is totally consonant with her age. Very young children do not make realistic recognizable images; their efforts to draw or paint are simply marks on a surface. The formation of shapes that is the first step towards object depiction comes at a later stage of development. So what we have here is an investiture..child “dauber” into adult artist, a feat possible only in an age that has previously witnessed the invention and validation of painting abstractly.

As with the Namuth film of Pollock painting, *My Kid Could Paint That* enables us to watch the painter perform for the camera. We are given glimpses into the production of a number of artworks; in place of a

balding paint-spattered tragic figure... tragic because we already know his end...we have instead an enchanting little four year old, performing a similar process of painting on canvas. On innumerable occasions throughout the film, we get to watch Marla (in diapers initially, then pyjamas or play outfit) sitting on the kitchen floor in front of a large-size coloured canvas. She picks up a squeeze bottle of paint, one of a number set out for her, applies it to the surface of the canvas, and then spreads the colour around with a large plastic spatula, or she uses an over-size brush to move it around and across the surface (given the limitations of her little arms). It is quite remarkable to watch a child so closely resemble an adult’s performance. And it is precisely this imitation or in Baudrillardian terms ‘simulation’ of the act of painting abstractly that I believe has captured so many people. For Marla *seems* to know what she’s doing; she *seems* to thoughtfully push and pull the paint around as a real artist would. But there’s a real and significant difference here. When

Pollock was asked about his *seemingly* arbitrary method of painting, he responded: “Technique is just a means of arriving at a statement. When I am painting I have a general notion as to what I’m about. I can control the flow of the paint. There is no accident...”³ When Marla is asked by an interviewer to comment on her work, she responds by shrugging her shoulders and demurring. It quickly becomes obvious that she has no language to draw on in which to frame her work for the viewer, and it’s here where the analogy to a ‘real artist’ breaks down. No art historical knowledge, no technical prowess, no theory or artistic problems or challenges or her place in the art scene/world is ever articulated by her. Her appearances at her openings, which look just like the real thing, are marked by the way in which she refuses to participate as an adult; although dressed up in good clothes, she prefers to sit on the floor with other children and play, while the big people are drinking their wine and chatting about art. And can you blame her? It’s hard not to feel sorry for this little girl who has

been catapulted out of normal childhood into the 'Jon-Benet-like' world of freakish child celebrity.

The film undergoes a radical shift in tone about half way through when the authenticity of Marla's accomplishment is questioned on prime-time television. During a *60 Minutes Wednesday* show with Charlie Rose, a psychologist who has studied gifted children and specializes in Visual Arts is asked to respond to Marla's 'precociousness'. After viewing videotape of Marla painting provided by CBS and Marla's parents, Winner concludes that Marla couldn't have painted the completed and displayed works without the intervention of an adult. Her painting technique, she states, is exactly like that of any other child her age, yet the finished paintings show a sophistication far beyond what the filmed footage of Marla painting indicated. To further emphasize the point, Winner states bluntly that the father can be (over)heard directing his daughter to keep on painting, or to add more colour. At this point, the film stops being a documentary about an unlikely success story and turns into a quest to discover the truth; does she paint her pictures or is she manipulated by her father? Is she a fake?

The problem seems to be that when Bar-Lev's cinematographers film Marla painting a work for any length of time, that painting is of lesser quality than the ones that have been shown in public. Marla is shown mixing colours on top of each other directly on the canvas, a technique that produces muddled colours. At times she is basically finger painting, as any child of her age would. The prime question of the film (and the filmmaker's own querying) becomes whether Marla can be filmed by someone other than her parents, painting a 'good' painting' continuously from beginning to end.⁴

However, it is a strategy of the open-endedness of Bar-Lev's film that we his audience never get to see that film, so our doubt remains.

Whether her father intervened in the actual production or not, what's clear with regards to Marla's authorship, is that decisions were made for her that assisted the reception of her

art as on the same level as a professional artist's. Young children don't paint on professionally made canvases that are large in size (the two mentioned above are 48"x72" and 48"x48" respectively), nor do they have access to (very expensive) oversize paintbrushes and scrapers which artists use to create the large brushstrokes and marks characteristic of abstract art. (I can't imagine that Marla made a shopping list for her father). Her canvases have all been prepared for her with a flat colour ground, not the white that is customary for artists since the Impressionists; the liquid paints in squeeze bottles are arranged around the canvas which in most of the instances shown in the film is placed on the floor, like Pollock's, although Marla tends to sit, working in one place at a time, unlike Pollock's all-over application of paint. Marla doesn't mix her own paints ahead of time or even at the time; she uses what's been arranged for her. The 'coup de grace' of course is the child-like signature 'Marla', awkwardly painted somewhere on the canvas in uneven childlike letters, sometimes with the R reversed.

This primitive signature is replicated in vinyl and used as a wall decoration/advertisement in one of her shows.

Is There Anything There?

Pollock's paintings were taken seriously at the time they were made by other artists, critics, museum people and eventually the public precisely because they were seen as participating in the challenge for American artists to produce an abstract art for their time and place.

Marla's abstract paintings seem to be able to be taken seriously as art by people who don't like abstract art precisely because they have been done by a four year old who knows nothing about art, and are themselves, about nothing. This is reassuring. It enables the viewer/patron to read into them anything they want because whatever they say will be acceptable.⁵ The entire system of validation in the art world...critical success, honours and awards, and institutional acquisitions is bypassed

at this level for the opportunity to participate in a mass-mediated sensationalism founded on the premise that a four year old could make "art". The new patron does not have to know anything either, reversing the requirements brought on by the opacity of abstract art, let alone modernist art, in the twentieth century. What *My Kid Could Paint That* demonstrates so clearly is the farce of it all.

Notes

- 1 This sequence was notably emulated in Ed Harris's film on Jackson Pollock titled *Pollock* (2000). I happened to get into the press screening at the TIFF that year when it was shown, but there had been such a crush of people that the only seat left was in the front row. In any other case I would have deferred my viewing, but as I was very keen to see it I stayed. What I remember most was precisely that sequence, as I was practically in it sitting only a few feet away from the screen. Harris had spent several months learning how to paint like Pollock and had carefully studied Namuth's film so he could channel it.
- 2 This painting, "Number 29, 1950", was purchased by the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, where it is on display. Just outside the door to the room it's in there is a little viewing space...a few comfortable chairs and a monitor, where Namuth's film is shown on a continuous basis.
- 3 Quoted from the voice-over narration by Pollock for Namuth's film.
- 4 *60 minutes* was given permission to set up a hidden camera with which to observe Marla painting a picture, from beginning to end. (see www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/02/22/60II/main675522.shtml for edited clips from this documentary footage.) Winner reviewed the footage and stood by her initial sceptical response.
"My mind was not changed by watching 4-and-a-half hours of home videotape. I saw her making very ordinary kinds of marks, no different from what a typical 3- or 4-year-old would make. She didn't seem to have any overall plan. And she didn't seem very focused."
- 5 An amusing moment in the film occurs when one of the self-styled "Marla collectors", in raving about the impact one of her paintings has on him, refers to a few green brushstrokes in the upper left corner of a totally abstract painting as depicting a green door through which he would like to travel. Marla, of course, is silent on the matter.

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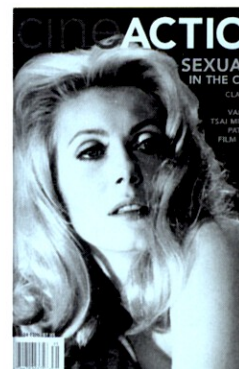
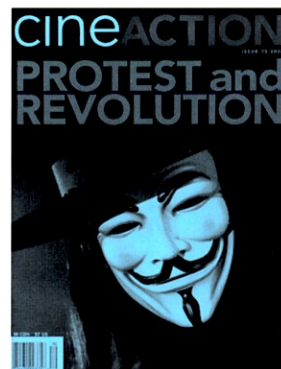
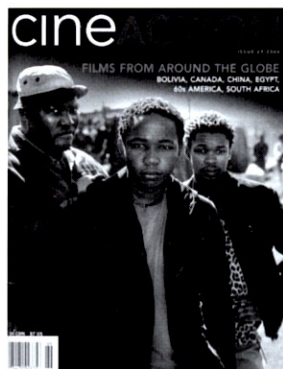
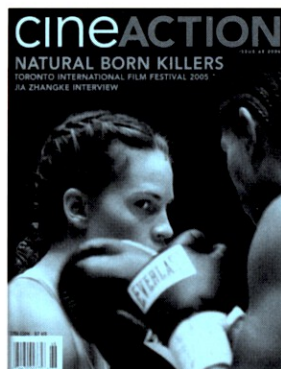
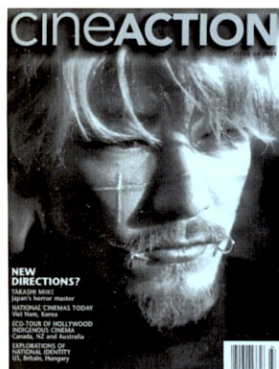
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